LIVING BODHISATTVAS—
HISTORICAL AND TEXTUAL SOURCES OF PRACTITIONER IDENTITY IN THE TZU CHI SCHOOL OF BUDDHISM

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAIʻI AT MĀNOA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS IN RELIGION
MAY 2019

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Keywords: Tzu Chi, Taiwan, Buddhism, Religion

Acknowledgments

This thesis represents a culmination, both of my Master's program in Religion at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, and of my own personal project of finding a steady course for my life. In terms of the former, I extend my gratitude, in particular, to my committee members, Dr. Jonathan Pettit, Dr. Helen Baroni and Dr. Sean Smith. Their insights, suggestions and critiques have been essential for bringing this thesis to its present form. I would also like to thank all of my various professors, but specifically Dr. Jeffrey Kapali Lyon, who helped me see the value in my connection with the Tzu Chi Foundation as a focus for my research, and Dr. Ramdas Lam, who planted the initial seeds which eventually inspired me to apply to this program several years after my time as an undergraduate at UH.

In terms of the personal journey that has led me to this point, I am indebted to my family, friends and coworkers who provided the love and support that smoothed my path along the way. For quieting my inner storms, for softening my maddened sense of urgency, and for giving perspective to my inner perfectionist, I am very grateful. I am also grateful for the accommodations afforded me by Tzu Chi's Dharma as Water office, which enabled me to continue my translation work while still maintaining the necessary time and space to focus on my academic journey. Recovery from mental and physical health issues is not easily combined with the work of a graduate degree, but this thesis is proof that it is possible when one is fortunate enough to have ample support from family, friends and faculty. A new path now extends before me, and only by advancing on it can I begin to repay the grace that everyone has shown me during this process.

順逆增緣知識，必具有大因緣

Abstract

Taiwan's Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation is a charitable organization founded on the teachings of Humanistic Buddhism, which traces its history most directly to the Chinese Chan tradition. For practitioners of the Tzu Chi school of Buddhism, spiritual practice most often takes the form of regular participation in a variety of charitable activities. To advance the aims of her organization, Tzu Chi's founder, Dharma Master Cheng Yen, makes use of traditional Buddhist teachings to inspire and mobilize her massive international network of volunteers. These volunteers, whom she calls Living Bodhisattvas, are encouraged to adopt the values she emphasizes through her teachings and to integrate them into their identity as Tzu Chi practitioners. This thesis provides an examination of the construction of this practitioner identity, from its historical roots to the implications it holds for the lives of the everyday followers of Tzu Chi in Taiwan. A range of moral values are identified, followed by an analysis of how they are adapted to form the cohesive religious identity of Tzu Chi's Living Bodhisattva-practitioners. In the final analysis, this examination is intended to suggest how this form of practitioner identity contributes to the spirit and success of the organization as a whole. Chapter I begins with a history of Humanistic Buddhism, followed by an analysis of Cheng Yen's interpretation of Buddhist doctrine in Chapter II, and a survey in Chapter III of biographical narratives from Tzu Chi's publications, through which the organization's values are projected onto the lives of real practitioners.

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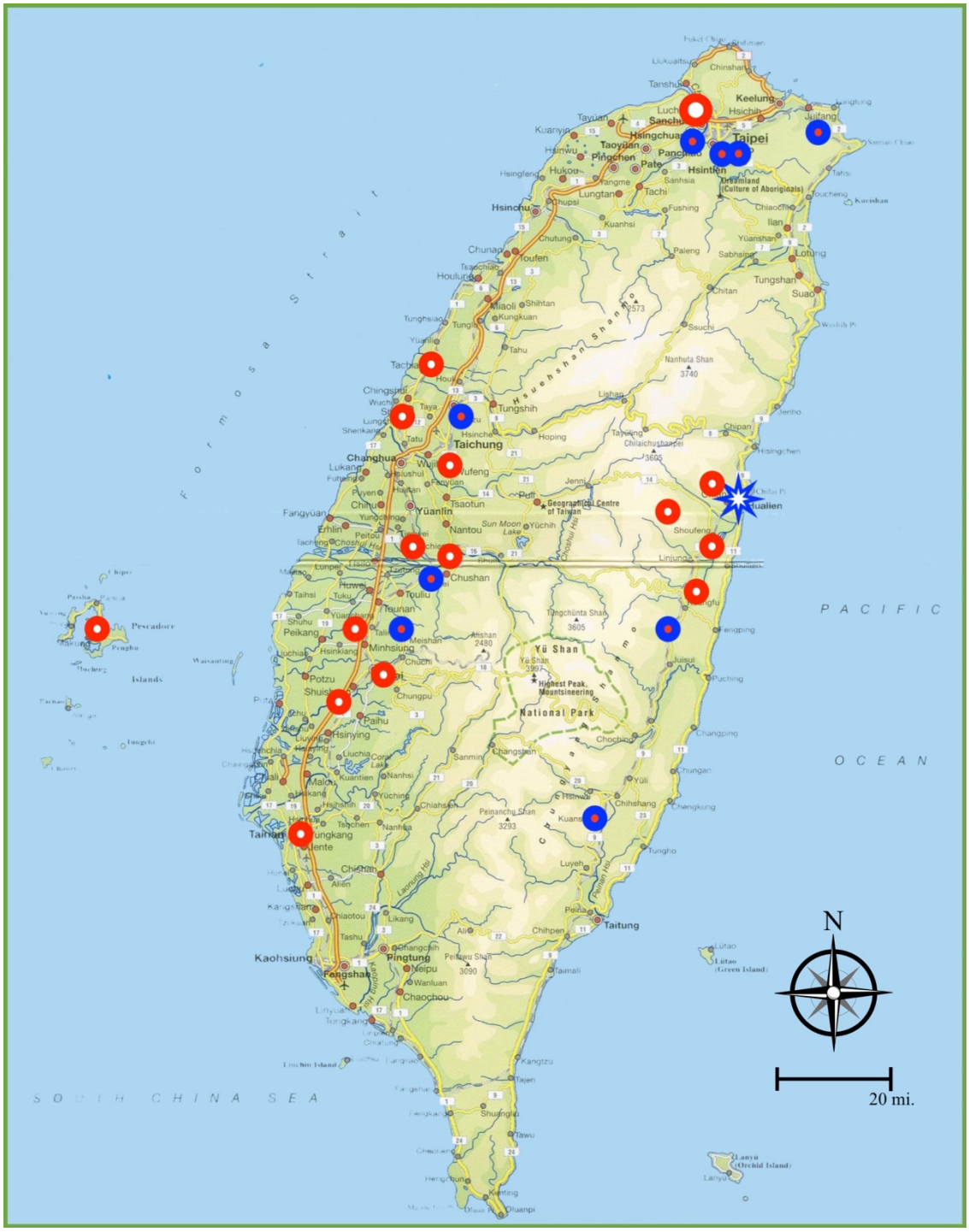

Map Key:

Tzu Chi headquarters Tzu Chi hospitals Tzu Chi schools

Translations and Conventions

Throughout this thesis, Chinese names and words are presented according to the way they most commonly appear in print. The names of people and places in Taiwan are transliterated according to the Wade-Giles romanization system, which is still in use there and reflects the way these names appear in the majority of the Tzu Chi Foundation's English language publications. All translations of important Chinese words are followed by *pinyin* romanization in parentheses, along with the corresponding Chinese characters. All Chinese characters are "traditional" (*fántǐ zì* 繁體字), as is the standard in Taiwan. The *pinyin* and characters are provided because many of the terms that appear frequently in Tzu Chi teachings are often given differing English equivalents in other English language sources of Buddhist theology and philosophy. The English equivalents given in this thesis are presented according to the conventions of Tzu Chi's Dharma As Water (DAW) translation team, based in Honolulu, Hawai'i. The DAW team produces a broad range of Tzu Chi's English language materials, including several book translations and the subtitles for broadcasts of Dharma Master Cheng Yen's Dharma-talks on the *Lotus Sutra*. All transliterations of foreign terms, primarily those from Sanskrit, are italicized and substituted with an English equivalent in subsequent appearances, unless the original is more commonly used. All translations that are my own include the source text below for reference.

Introduction
Tzu Chi: A Humanistic Buddhist Movement in Modern Taiwan

Taiwan's Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation (*Fójiaò cíjì jījín huì* 佛教慈濟基金會), one of the largest and most successful international Buddhist charity organizations, was founded in 1966 by a nun with the Dharma-name Cheng Yen (*Zhèng Yàn* 正嚴). Tzu Chi (*cíjì* 慈濟) translates to "compassion and relief," reflecting the organization's primary objective, which is to provide a range of charitable services throughout Taiwan and abroad. Cheng Yen's Tzu Chi Foundation has regional and branch offices around the world, and her followers engage in a variety of charitable activities that are intended to benefit society at large. Along with being a charitable organization, Tzu Chi is also a school of Buddhism, and Cheng Yen gives regular Dharma-talks that are broadcast around the world. To bridge the gap between charitable foundation and religious organization, Tzu Chi's members and volunteers, or "Tzu Chi people" (*Cíjì rén* 慈濟人), take Cheng Yen's teachings and directly apply them in their voluntary participation in the organization's missions. For this reason, Cheng Yen's Dharma-talks necessarily place a strong emphasis on moral qualities and behavioral practices. In doing so, her teachings focus on the role that Tzu Chi practitioners should play in their respective communities by adapting some of Mahāyāna Buddhism's most ubiquitous doctrines to create a strong sense of religious identity. Tzu Chi's missions depend on the participation of its members and volunteers, making this sense of identity arguably the driving force of the foundation's success in tackling projects that range from recycling to disaster relief.

Cheng Yen's interpretation of Buddhist Dharma identifies engaged volunteerism in the service of others as the most effective means of self-purification. As such, Tzu Chi's program of volunteer missions are fueled by Cheng Yen's multi-faceted teachings on the Buddhist practice of *dāna*, or charitable giving. Common throughout her Dharma-talks is the message that one's

spiritual practice is best cultivated by engaging with people, understanding their condition and relieving their suffering through multiple expressions of charitable giving. This is Tzu Chi's definition of the Bodhisattva-way (*púsà fǎ* 菩薩法). Thus, in the world of Tzu Chi (*Cíjì shìjiè* 慈濟世界), Cheng Yen's followers are portrayed as practicing selfless service to eliminate the suffering of others. It is for this reason that she refers to them as "Living Bodhisattvas" (*rénjiān púsà* 人間菩薩). This title and the specific qualities and practices that her followers are encouraged to cultivate contribute to the formation of this strongly held religious identity among Tzu Chi's practitioners. The attributes which comprise this identity emanate from a variety of sources. First, they are rooted in the history of Humanistic Buddhism, as developed by Buddhist reformers like the monks Tai Xu (1890-1947) and Yin Shun (1906-2005). Second, these attributes are reinforced through Cheng Yen's Dharma-talks, which focus heavily on her exegesis of the *Lotus Sutra*. Third and finally, they are projected onto real practitioners in the biographical accounts that feature prominently in Tzu Chi's various publications. It is this three-dimensional construction of the Living Bodhisattva-practitioner's identity in Tzu Chi that will serve as the primary focus of this thesis.

The Tzu Chi school of Buddhism was founded only recently in 2004, and it is predated by the Tzu Chi Foundation, its representative charitable organization, by 38 years. Prior to the organization's establishment, Cheng Yen lived behind a small local temple and gave Dharma-talks on several Buddhist sutras to her small following of disciples and lay-women. Foremost among the sutras that contributed to the development of Cheng Yen's philosophy was the *Lotus* Sutra. Similar to the role it plays in other East Asian Mahāyāna schools, the *Lotus Sutra* serves as the most important text in the Tzu Chi school of Buddhism. Today, Cheng Yen's exegesis of the *Lotus Sutra* is interpreted specifically with regard to the conduct of her followers and their

participation in charity work through Tzu Chi's missions. In particular, it is the *Lotus Sutra*'s depiction of bodhisattvas, legendary awakened beings, that inspires the ideals that she uses to describe her Living Bodhisattva-practitioners' charitable activities. In this way, practitioner identity in Tzu Chi is intrinsically linked to the practice of the bodhisattva-vehicle. According to Cheng Yen's teachings, it is only by engaging in the spiritual practices of a bodhisattva and working tirelessly to help others that one begins to truly walk the path that the Buddha intended his disciples to follow. A conventional definition of a bodhisattva is one who forms the intention to seek enlightenment, and in Mahāyāna Buddhism, it often refers to legendary beings in the sutras that have resolved to give rise to *bodhicitta*, e.g. Guanyin (Chn, *guānyīn* 觀音, Skt. Avalokiteśvara).[1] However, in Tzu Chi, Cheng Yen and her followers have developed the practices entailed in this search for awakening into a structured program of charitable and human-centered services. For this reason, Tzu Chi practitioners are called Living Bodhisattvas due to their participation in the organization's missions and initiatives.

The idea that practitioners can become bodhisattvas, while present in many Mahāyāna traditions, is also a defining characteristic of the tradition of Humanistic Buddhism. Originating in mainland China in the early 20th century, the spirit of Humanistic Buddhism was animated by a number of factors. Its primary founder, the Venerable Tai Xu, took issue with the common perception of Buddhism as a passive, antiquated tradition and sought to revive it from within. Beginning with Tai Xu, the lineage of Humanistic Buddhism is today carried on by the largest Buddhist organizations in Taiwan, Tzu Chi among them. Inspired by the spirit of this tradition, the religious identity of the Living Bodhisattva that Cheng Yen creates for her followers has

[1] Buswell, Robert E., and Donald S. Lopez, *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 600.

fueled the organization's success, both in Taiwan and internationally. This historical component, comprised of the conditions in China at the time of Humanistic Buddhism's inception and the vision of an engaged Buddhism that they inspired in Tai Xu, represent the first dimension of my analysis of Tzu Chi's Living Bodhisattva identity.

Growing from the roots of this historical component is Cheng Yen's particular interpretation of Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine. In order to mobilize Tzu Chi's program of volunteer-based charitable services, Cheng Yen relies on her daily Dharma-talks that, since 2013, have focused almost entirely on the *Lotus Sutra*. The topics that Cheng Yen addresses in these talks are permeated with some of the most common Buddhist teachings, which she interprets specifically in relation to the work of followers. The moral qualities and behavioral practices at the heart of her sermons are to be emulated in the attitude and conduct of her followers as they participate in Tzu Chi's missions. In this way, Cheng Yen's teachings provide a second dimension to the construction of practitioner identity in Tzu Chi.

Finally, along with the historical component and Cheng Yen's exegesis of Buddhist teachings, Tzu Chi's Living Bodhisattva identity is also brought into greater definition by portrayals of its practitioners in a wide variety of promotional and informational materials. One of its regular publications, *Tzu Chi Monthly* (*Cíjì Yuèkàn* 慈濟月刊), includes short biographical narratives of ideal practitioners that are framed in terms of Cheng Yen's teachings. Each of these stories describes, in the course of six to ten pages, the life circumstances of various individuals, how they came into contact with Tzu Chi, and the work that they do or have done with the organization. Often these portrayals incorporate a strong emotional affect, playing heavily on pathos to demonstrate the impact of Tzu Chi's values on the lives of these people. These stories also often include elements that are held in common with the biographies of Master Cheng Yen

herself, further reifying the idealized nature of the Living Bodhisattva identity. An examination of these short narratives alongside accounts from Cheng Yen's biographies provide the third dimension for drawing practitioner identity in Tzu Chi into clearer focus.

As outlined above, it is primarily through the historical spirit of Humanistic Buddhism, through Cheng Yen's exegesis of traditional texts and teachings, and through the qualities embodied by Tzu Chi followers as depicted in its periodical publications, that practitioner identity is defined. Each of these three dimensions possesses its own set of textual materials associated with it. Various important documents and interpretations of Buddhist texts from Cheng Yen's predecessors belong to the historical dimension, Cheng Yen's lectures and treatises comprise the exegetical dimension, while the final dimension consists of Cheng Yen's biographies alongside a selection of biographical narratives from Tzu Chi's periodical publications. Print media, as one of the primary ways that Tzu Chi disseminates its teachings, provides a relatively concrete basis with which to present a composite picture of the Living Bodhisattva-practitioner's identity.

With regard to the objective of defining the "ideal" type of practitioner, while it is certainly important to examine the real-life ways that Tzu Chi practitioners think about themselves, I would argue that this can only be accomplished effectively following a thorough analysis of sources produced by or affiliated with the organization itself. Certainly, an examination of practitioners' own perspectives would most likely reveal trends in personally- or collectively-held values, but in the case of Tzu Chi, the behavioral expectations that animate practitioners' participation in its missions appear to stem largely from the top of its organizational structure. While it is unreasonable to expect that every one of Cheng Yen's followers would embody all of the attributes that she commonly emphasizes, her authority and

charismatic persona lend strong influence to the qualities that she privileges in her teachings. In this way, the growth and success that the Tzu Chi Foundation has experienced seems to hinge on the kind of role that Cheng Yen has created for her followers to embody. Thus, my analysis will focus primarily on the messages about practitioner identity contained in the literature that both supports and surrounds Dharma Master Cheng Yen's Tzu Chi School of Buddhism.

Sources and Method

An analysis of textual resources that are published by or related to the organization is essential for understanding the transmission, development and expression of practitioner identity in Tzu Chi Buddhism. Although Tzu Chi has an extensive international reach and publications in many languages, the sources referenced in this thesis are only those intended for the Chinese speaking audience in Taiwan. Narrowing the scope of resources to those originating in Taiwan enables better continuity between the information on Tzu Chi as a Taiwanese phenomenon and the construction of an identity among people who are immersed in this same cultural milieu. While several of Tzu Chi's international missions are referenced in this thesis, quite often it is Taiwanese Tzu Chi members who pay their own way to travel to these far-off destinations to participate. Thus, by sticking to Taiwanese-originated sources, the following analysis retains a consistent interpretive lens to keep its findings relevant to these practitioners' particular cultural context. This allows for an examination of how the Living Bodhisattva identity is defined in Tzu Chi using sources that are available in and relevant to life in present day Taiwan, where Tzu Chi's success[2] has been long-established.

[2] For the purposes of this thesis, Tzu Chi's "success" is defined in terms of the organization's ability, as an entire entity, to carry out its work by collecting and appropriately allocating resources, in a relatively fluid way, to each of its missions via the organization's wide network of volunteers.

The textual sources referenced here are particularly representative of Tzu Chi's ideology, and they can be divided into three main categories from which the identity of Tzu Chi practitioners is drawn. The first chapter, begins with a short history of Humanistic Buddhism, followed by a few ideas about the role of practitioners and the general nature of human beings from Cheng Yen's predecessors, who informed and inspired her own philosophy. This chapter specifically focuses on the ideas developed by Tai Xu and his student Yin Shun, two of the most famous Buddhist reformer-monks whose work deeply influenced Cheng Yen's philosophical approach. Through an examination of the motivating factors that led to the inception of Humanistic Buddhism, the first chapter lays the groundwork for understanding the basic ideas that Cheng Yen has built upon in founding Tzu Chi, organizing its missions, and developing the Living Bodhisattva as a religious identity. From an analysis of these ideas about the ways these people believed that Buddhism should be practiced in the world, key qualities become readily identifiable, which should ideally characterize the practitioners who participate in their vision.

The second chapter examines a selection of teachings that are found commonly throughout Cheng Yen's own treatises and lectures. This section will focus on sets of qualities and practices as they have been explained in compilation works such as *Chronological Studies of Master Cheng Yen's Philosophy* (*Zhèng yán shàng rén sīxiǎng tǐxì tànjiù cóngshū* 證嚴上人思想體系探究叢書) and *Path to Truth* (*Zhēnshí zhī lù* 真實之路), as well as from her Dharma-talks on the *Lotus Sutra*. An examination of these qualities and practices provides a clear picture of the kind of religious identity Cheng Yen has developed for her followers to adopt, drawing upon the ideas of her predecessors. As a synthesis of these ideas from her mentors, the formulation of practitioner identity she has developed makes use of teachings that are ubiquitous to Mahāyāna

Buddhism, while adapting them in a somewhat novel way to relate specifically to Tzu Chi's missions.

Finally, Chapter Three examines a selection of short biographical narratives from the periodical, *Tzu Chi Monthly,* along with excerpted biographical information on Cheng Yen from Tzu Chi or Tzu Chi-sponsored publications. Translations of short biographies on exceptional practitioners from this publication reflect the attributes Cheng Yen encourages her followers to cultivate. These are qualities that have also been attributed to Cheng Yen in her own official biographies, creating a parallel which serves as the primary focus for this chapter. This parallel creates a framework for examining how these values are adapted to fit the lives of real Tzu Chi practitioners who appear in these short biographical narratives, as well as the kind of image they create of the Living Bodhisattva identity. This chapter draws together the information from Chapters I and II to show how the ideals that inspire, and thus characterize, Cheng Yen's teachings have been mapped onto Tzu Chi practitioners in order to promote the quintessential spirit of the organization.

This approach is intended to create a three-dimensional composite profile of the ideal Tzu Chi practitioner – as derived from Humanistic Buddhism's historical development, as represented in Cheng Yen's teachings, and as projected onto the practitioners highlighted in Tzu Chi's monthly literature. As stated earlier, this approach is intentionally focused on the image that Tzu Chi projects onto its followers. The primary analysis of this thesis is focused on practitioner identity as it is embodied by Tzu Chi's followers and the ways it shapes their participation in the organization's missions, leading to its overall success. For the purposes of this thesis, practitioner identity is defined as a byproduct of Tzu Chi's official doctrine, rather than as a manifestation of the much more complex and abstract reality of Tzu Chi practitioners'

own self-conceptualization. This is not to say that the image Tzu Chi projects onto practitioners is entirely misaligned with their own understanding of their role, but only that it was beyond the scope of my research to delve into this more complicated intersection.

While Cheng Yen rarely addresses the notion of an "ideal" type of Tzu Chi practitioner directly, there are certain normative claims contained within her teachings. By using these claims to examine the Living Bodhisattva identity in depth, the methodology of my analysis takes the form, while perhaps lacking the function, of Max Weber's ideal type.[3] That is to say, this representation is not specifically intended to measure real behaviors, but rather to understand the moral and behavioral standards against which practitioners may measure themselves. In other words, this methodology, as a tool for the study of religion more generally, might be employed to examine the relationship between institutions and their constituents by defining the normative expectations created by the former and mapped onto the latter. In future research, a profile generated by this kind of study may then be used to measure how practitioners moderate themselves according to established conventions, in a more genuinely Weberian fashion.

This issue of ideal practitioner identity has also been addressed by Steven Katz in his study of religious mysticism.[4] In Katz's 2000 address to a conference on the future of the study of religion, he claims that every religious community "has a 'model' or 'models' of the *ideal* practitioner of the religious life."[5] By way of example, Katz cites the imitation of Jesus Christ as the dominant model for spiritual practice in Christian mystic traditions. Certainly, Cheng Yen does not claim a salvific role for Tzu Chi practitioners, and the content of her Dharma-talks reflects teachings that are attributed to the historical Buddha, who serves as a much closer

[3] Weber, Max. *Methodology of Social Sciences*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2011), 42–43.
[4] See: Katz, Steven T. "Diversity and the Study of Mysticism." In *The Future of the Study of Religion: Proceedings of Congress 2000*, edited by Lori Pearson and Slavica Jakelíc, (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 189–210.
[5] Katz, *Diversity*, 195.

comparison to Katz's "model" of the ideal practitioner. However, just as the behaviors and teachings of Jesus Christ are broken down into teachable qualities and practices for Christian followers to emulate, Cheng Yen also presents her own set of qualities and practices which together amount to a model of practitioner identity for Tzu Chi's followers to adopt. This is the Living Bodhisattva-identity that this thesis will attempt to define in clear terms. Together, Weber and Katz' theories explain the form that this Living Bodhisattva identity takes, as a collection of normative moral qualities and behavioral practices which Cheng Yen and the Tzu Chi Foundation construct to serve as a model for practitioners to emulate.

The central argument of this analysis draws on Turner's Social Identity Theory[6] and the theory of Religious Social Identity developed by Greenfield and Marks.[7] I draw on these theories to explain how this idealized representation of practitioner identity outlined above is directly correlated to the participation of Tzu Chi's practitioners that makes its missions successful. Tzu Chi is a powerful entity in Taiwanese society, and the sheer volume of resources at its disposal speaks to the dedication of its practitioners. The kind of social identity that best explains this success can be understood using findings from both of these studies. First, Turner et al.'s study shows that informational influence and its validation through ingroup consensus contributes to group cohesion and cooperation.[8] As will become evident through my analysis, Tzu Chi's missions depend on this kind of like-minded cooperation in order to accomplish the large-scale projects they undertake. The informational influence which fuels this cohesion is the religious philosophy of Cheng Yen, whose teachings provide a normalized set of qualities and practices

[6] Turner JC, Hogg HA, Oakes PJ, Reicher SD, Wetherell MS, Rediscovering the social group: A self-categorization theory, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd; 1987).
[7] Greenfield, E. A., & Marks, N. F. (2007), Religious Social Identity as an Explanatory Factor for Associations between More Frequent Formal Religious Participation and Psychological Well-Being, *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, *17*(3), 245–259.
[8] Turner et al., *Rediscovering the social group*, 76.

for Tzu Chi's practitioners to adopt. From this perspective, their consensus on the validity of her teachings is indicated by the level of group cohesion and cooperation that her followers are able to achieve. To give an idea of the size and scope of this cohesion and cooperation, Tzu Chi claims more than 10 million members worldwide,[9] while a survey conducted by the Ministry of the Interior of Taiwan found that 12.6% of respondents had participated in a Tzu Chi activity.[10] Calculated in terms of Taiwan's total population of 23.58 million, that amounts to slightly less than 3 million Tzu Chi participants throughout the island.

Greenfield and Marks' study contributes to this argument by explaining how these teachings can function as a kind of religious social identity. The level of cooperation of Tzu Chi practitioners is evident in their accomplishments, which are achieved through a high frequency of participation among these dedicated volunteers. Greenfield and Marks' findings claim that this kind of strong dedication and frequent participation in religious functions is directly related to an individual's identification with a strongly held religious social identity.[11] In the case of Tzu Chi, this identity takes the form of Cheng Yen's concept of the Living Bodhisattva. This expression of religious identity is inextricably linked with regular participation in the organization's charitable missions, which are all largely successful in Taiwan. The qualities and practices that compose this religious identity, as derived from the three main sources outlined previously, thus enable the success of Tzu Chi's missions and indicate the salience of the Living Bodhisattva as a category of social identity with which many of its practitioners strongly identify. The theoretical lens provided by Turner et al. and Greenfield & Marks' theories explains the function of the

[9] Tzu Chi Foundation, "Tzu Chi Missions," (1 December, 2009).
[10] Schak, David and Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao, "Taiwan's Socially Engaged Buddhist Groups", *China Perspectives*, 59: May - June 2005, June 1, 2008, Accessed April 20, 2019. http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/2803
[11] Greenfield, *Religious Social Identity*, 252.

Living Bodhisattva identity, as a social category with which Tzu Chi's practitioners identify, resulting in their strong dedication and participation in its missions.

Literature Review

Due to its widespread activism throughout the island, the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation features commonly among contemporary academic publications that discuss the situation of religion in modern Taiwan. Those publications that discuss Tzu Chi in any depth invariably examine the qualities of the leadership of its founder, Dharma Master Cheng Yen. Indeed, it is an emotional connection to Cheng Yen that many Tzu Chi followers in Taiwan credit as their primary reason for taking part in this relatively-new religious movement.[12] Focusing on her much beloved public persona and personal energy, papers by Yan Ho-don et al. (2018) and Julia Huang (2008) examine her charismatic leadership with a focus on entrepreneurship and gender studies, respectively. Yan et al. examine how the Tzu Chi Foundation's network of volunteers throughout Taiwan are effectively mobilized to participate in regular charity work and to provide a quick response to major natural and manmade disasters, both nationally and abroad. Huang's work examines the implications of Cheng Yen as being one of the only eminent female leaders of such a large-scale Buddhist organization, and she uses this to address her ideas about the gendered aspect of charisma.

As for other scholarly works, Jones (1999), Pittman (2001), Clart and Jones (2003), and King (2009) also address Tzu Chi as a Taiwanese religious phenomenon, using two main frames of reference. The first and third of these works attempt to position Tzu Chi historically, while the second and fourth attempt to reconstruct its philosophical lineage to some degree. All of them however, deal with religion as a Taiwanese phenomenon, and they all take up Tzu Chi as an

[12] Huang, C. Julia, "Gendered Charisma in the Buddhist Tzu Chi Movement." *Nova Religio* 12, no. 2 (November 2008), 30.

important example to support their broader theses. Below is a basic overview of these works that lays out the ways their approaches both fit with and depart from the approach to be taken in this thesis. While these studies all provide very valuable and informative perspectives on Tzu Chi, they lack a comprehensive examination of its teachings and how its doctrine characterizes the relationship it shares with its constituents.

"Social Entrepreneurship and Charismatic Leadership," by Yan Ho-don, Wu Chi-yin and Lin Ruey-fa of Feng Chia University in Taiwan, examines Tzu Chi as a representative of social entrepreneurship. This engagement of Tzu Chi followers with the eight main missions and initiatives of the organization is analyzed in light of the charismatic leadership of its founder, Dharma Master Cheng Yen. The researchers employ a framework for assessing the efficacy of charismatic leadership developed by J. Choi (2006) in "A Motivational Theory of Charismatic Leadership." Using the three benchmarks of envisioning, empathy and empowerment, Yan et al. assess the effect of Cheng Yen's leadership vis-à-vis the vibrant social entrepreneurship that characterizes the activity of the organization's members. This paper makes important observations about the way particular activities are motivated by Cheng Yen's leadership as defined by these three qualities. In general, however, their analysis lacks a doctrinal component. While it is useful to understand the dynamics of the master-disciple relationship, it is difficult to examine the specific ways that practitioners' engagement with Tzu Chi's missions are directly related to the teachings Cheng Yen emphasizes without an examination of the doctrine she espouses.

In "Gendered Charisma in Tzu Chi," Julia Huang provides an analysis of Cheng Yen's influence on her followers from a contemporary feminist perspective. As the only female leader among the three largest Taiwanese Buddhist organizations, Cheng Yen's leadership style and

embodiment of a charismatic persona are the focus of Huang's article. In the course of laying out her analysis of the impact of Cheng Yen's charisma on her relationship with followers, Huang provides several vignettes of female Tzu Chi members. She examines testimony and biographical details of three different esteemed followers of Cheng Yen, correlating their accounts with information about the female gender role in Taiwanese society and how they perceive their connection with Cheng Yen. This model of providing short biographical narratives to examine the impact Cheng Yen's teachings have on her followers is extremely useful. However, in contrast with Huang's approach, the present analysis examines the ways that particular values in Tzu Chi are projected from the sources of Cheng Yen's philosophy, through the lens of her own exegesis and onto her followers by way of these portrayals.

Charles B. Jones' book, *Buddhism in Taiwan – Religion and the State, 1660-1990* (1999), examines Buddhism in Taiwan from a historical perspective. His intent is to determine whether or not there are regional particularities of Taiwanese Buddhism that could cause other scholars to reexamine their generalizations about Chinese Buddhism as a single entity. He concludes that, while Buddhist organizations throughout Taiwan's history have followed some of the same broader trends followed by Buddhism in mainland China, there are indeed distinctions between them. With regard to Tzu Chi, he positions the organization within the particular historical context of the retrocession of Taiwan to the Republic of China (ROC) and the arrival of mainland reformist clergy 17 years prior to the foundation's establishment. His analysis of the historical conditions through which Tzu Chi was able to arise, become established and eventually thrive, along with those broader undercurrents of influence common to "Chinese Buddhism" as a whole, are crucial to the picture I will develop. Rather than a strictly historical perspective,

however, I hope to examine the shape that Tzu Chi's doctrine has taken as a result of the historical development of Humanistic Buddhism in China and Taiwan.

Along with a historical approach reminiscent of Jones' above, Don A. Pittman (2001) also applies a second frame of reference, i.e. the Venerable Tai Xu's efforts to reform Buddhism in mainland China. His work, *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism: Taixu's Reforms*, traces the ideas Tai Xu developed in the pursuit of a new form of Buddhism that he hoped would become relevant to practitioners' daily living. Viewing Chinese Buddhism as a whole as having become increasingly stagnant, Tai Xu hoped to see Buddhism become relevant to people's daily lives, just as Protestant Christianity had accomplished by the late Qing dynasty, during his lifetime. His disciple Yin Shun took up this mantle of formulating a human-centered Buddhism and brought it with him to Taiwan after the ROC's defeat in the Chinese Civil War. Once there, Yin Shun in turn passed this mission on to his own disciples, including Cheng Yen, which led to the founding of Tzu Chi. Rather than the strictly historical perspective taken above by Jones, Pittman traces elements of Tai Xu's doctrine through to the influence it came to have on Buddhist organizations in Taiwan, like Tzu Chi. While Tai Xu's ideas will occupy a portion of the first chapter, more relevant to this thesis is the way that his ideas influenced Yin Shun, and later, became the roots of Cheng Yen's Tzu Chi doctrine.

Religion in Modern Taiwan (2003), edited by Philip Clart and Charles Jones, also examines Tzu Chi as part of the historical development of Buddhism in Taiwan. The essays in this volume examine religion as a Taiwanese phenomenon in the decades since 1949, using a more focused historical perspective. Thematically, the essays begin by providing an in-depth examination of the ROC's policies towards religion on the island, from the period of martial law through to the relatively recent present. The essay titled *Religious Change and Democratization*

in Postwar Taiwan, by André Laliberté, positions Tzu Chi within a particular set of historical circumstances, including Taiwan's vibrant economic development of the 1970s and 80s, known as the Taiwan Miracle. As in the previous work by Jones, Laliberté argues that the increase of financial resources among average Taiwanese households enabled the rapid development of a consumer economy. Providing balance to this period of blossoming consumerism were grassroots Buddhist organizations like Tzu Chi, which provided a channel for giving these new resources a moral purpose. In addition to charity work, these Buddhist organizations were in turn able to accomplish the kinds of development in technology and media production discussed in the paper by Yan et al. Laliberté's analysis sheds light on the ways that practitioner identity is now able to be projected onto Tzu Chi's followers, through an understanding of the historical role they have come to play in the organization over time.

Finally, King's book, *Socially Engaged Buddhism* (2009), looks at Tzu Chi from within the pan-Buddhist context of other socially engaged groups active in regions from East Asia to North America and Europe. While her work takes an international approach, she is able to tie together the various groups she mentions using the common threads of pan-Buddhist doctrine they share. Like Pittman's book, King traces the influence that Buddhist doctrine at large has had on socially engaged Buddhist organizations around the world today. Her section on Tzu Chi, though relatively brief, positions Tzu Chi's doctrine within a much broader framework of Buddhist beliefs and expressions of spiritual practice around the world. While this is not useful for understanding the particularities of practitioner identity as it is constructed in Taiwan, this study is useful for understanding the basic motivations present in similar organizations across the globe. Indeed, Tzu Chi claims that its teachings are universal and transcend national boundaries, and to some extent, points from King's book help to reinforce this idea.

As a successful charitable foundation with an international presence, it follows naturally that Cheng Yen's teachings take up some of these threads which connect the Buddhisms of many different places around the world. This quality of universality is one that Cheng Yen emphasizes, particularly when addressing the spread of Tzu Chi through its international aid and relief efforts. While the universality of any set of teachings is of course largely subjective, it is a quality that nonetheless serves to characterize the organization's central teachings and mission. As such, this quality in turn serves to moderate the expression of Tzu Chi's particular brand of Buddhist teachings, with their own particular historical roots, thus influencing the role they play in shaping practitioner identity in meaningful ways.

Specifically, what distinguishes my research is its focus on defining the institutionally-generated identity of Tzu Chi's practitioners by way of doctrinal analysis. What I find most lacking in other scholarship on Tzu Chi is any detailed mention of Cheng Yen's specific teachings and their adaptation into an identity for her followers to adopt, in such a way that they are motivated and inspired to actively and regularly take part in the organization's missions. While it is beyond the scope of my research to give an account of the way that Tzu Chi practitioners themselves identify, or not, with Tzu Chi's doctrine, the size and scope of the organization as a whole, and the overall success of its missions, particularly in the fields of medicine and disaster relief, indicate that Cheng Yen's teachings have an inspirational and motivational effect. The fact that Cheng Yen uses the title of Living Bodhisattva as a way to synthesize the core of Tzu Chi doctrine and adapt it to the individual identity of her followers suggests that this Living Bodhisattva identity is an integral part of this process. My research seeks to examine how this identity is created and adapted to Tzu Chi's practitioners in ways that might ultimately lead them to make Tzu Chi as successful as it has become, particularly in

Taiwan. Through an examination of the historical, exegetic and biographical components of this identity, this thesis provides a thorough account of the influential factors which may play a large role in driving the organization's volunteers to carry its work to fruition.

Chapter 1
Revolution and Reform: The History of Tzu Chi's Humanistic Buddhism

The historical dimension of the Living Bodhisattva as a mode of religious identity is essential for understanding how it has taken shape in the Tzu Chi school of Buddhism. While the idea that practitioners can become bodhisattvas is not unique to Tzu Chi, or even Humanistic Buddhism more generally, it is a key component of the kind of spiritual practice that Cheng Yen encourages her followers to cultivate. By understanding the motivations that led to Tai Xu's inception of the Humanistic Buddhist movement in the early 20th century, the work that Tzu Chi practitioners engage in today can be more clearly contextualized. While Tai Xu's work led to the formation of Humanistic Buddhism as a relatively politicized movement in his day, his disciple Yin Shun's exegesis of the Buddhist canon in terms of Tai Xu's vision has provided much of the substance of Humanistic Buddhist philosophy, as it is represented in Tzu Chi. Following an analysis of a few specific ideas that these two reformer-monks contributed to the tradition as a whole, this chapter also lays out a brief history of Cheng Yen and the Tzu Chi Foundation to show how the vision developed by Tai Xu and elaborated upon by Yin Shun has largely come to fruition through the work that Tzu Chi's volunteers undertake.

The Tzu Chi School of Buddhism (*Cíjì zōngmén* 慈濟宗門) was founded only recently in 2004, while the Tzu Chi Foundation, the division of the organization dedicated to charity work, was established in 1966. Despite the tradition's relatively recent inception, its foundational teachings can be traced back through a distinct historical lineage of Buddhist teachers. Tzu Chi's founder Cheng Yen was tonsured under the Venerable Master Yin Shun, a well renowned Buddhist monk and scholar, who himself was the disciple of Tai Xu, the radical reformer who lived during China's late Qing and Republican periods. Tai Xu's work to reform the Chinese approach to Buddhist philosophy was a largely political campaign of ideas, and his proposals

were met with resistance from conservative members of the sangha. However, his push to establish a "Buddhism for this life" (*rénshēng fójiào* 人生佛教) paved the way for others to posthumously bring his ideas to fruition.

Tai Xu's student, Yin Shun, took up his mantle of Humanistic Buddhism, which he would call *rénjiān fójiào* 人間佛教, or "this-worldly Buddhism." Unlike Tai Xu, Yin Shun's preference for literary study made him one of the most well-known scholars of Buddhism in Taiwan, as well as one of the most prolific writers. It was through his writings that Cheng Yen became aware of him, and a chance encounter led her to become his student. Undertaking the mission handed down from Tai Xu, Cheng Yen's Tzu Chi Foundation has become one of several large organizations practicing Humanistic Buddhism in Taiwan. In the Tzu Chi school of Buddhism, these early ideas about the role Buddhist practitioners should play in modern society can be seen in the work that Tzu Chi's Living Bodhisattva practitioners undertake today.

The Influence of Tai Xu

Entering the monastery at the age of fourteen, Tai Xu was brought up in the Chan tradition. However, it is arguably the social and political circumstances contemporary to his young adulthood that had the greatest impact on the course of his spiritual development. Pittman's account of Tai Xu's young adulthood indicates that he embodied the zeitgeist of his era, seeking for Buddhism the same kind of revolutionary transformation that wrested control of China from the corruption of the Qing dynasty. The influx of western culture in the mid-19th century following the Opium Wars had created a crisis of confidence among Chinese intellectuals about the assumed superiority of Chinese culture and its viability in the future. With the removal of the Qing government in 1912, many elements of the old order began to be questioned, including the value of Confucianism, the paternalistic moral code that guided

Chinese society for millennia. Meanwhile, the social and scientific philosophies of the west also began to trickle in, with translations of books like Darwin's *Origin of Species*, Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*, and Spencer's *A Study of Sociology,* all becoming widely available.[1] Many influential people imagined the creation of a new social order to confront the looming challenges of the coming age. This atmosphere of political and social revolution inspired Tai Xu's philosophy.

Tai Xu's formulation of Buddhist doctrine provides much of the backbone of Yin Shun's, and later Cheng Yen's teachings. Moreover, his ideas about the place of Buddhist practice in modern society clearly inform notions of practitioner identity for contemporary Buddhist groups like Tzu Chi, through which many of Tai Xu's reforms have come to fruition. For Tai Xu, as Don Pittman explains, "religious actions were at the very heart of spiritual life."[2] While this may be a superficially bland statement, Tai Xu's emphasis on religious "actions" stood in stark contrast with the popular perception of Buddhism in his day. Many people viewed Buddhism as a passive religion, whose monastics lived off of charity and made a profit by conducting funerary rituals. If Buddhism was to survive in the modern world, Tai Xu argued that it needed to begin by addressing consequential worldly problems. Furthermore, he contended that it was only through this kind of compassionate action and experience that the wisdom necessary for total enlightenment could be cultivated. By his definition, the initial arousal of *bodhicitta* (*pútí xīn* 菩提心), or the enlightened-nature, in an aspiring practitioner would lead them to make vows and engage in compassionate service of others. Thus, Tai Xu's definition of a *bodhisattva* was

[1] Pittman, Don A., *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism; Tai Xu's Reforms*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 23.
[2] Pittman, *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism*, 7.

anyone willing to walk the path of helping others as the primary component of their search for enlightenment.[3]

For Tai Xu, as well as for Yin Shun and Cheng Yen after him, anyone who is inspired by the initial awakening of *bodhicitta* is a bodhisattva. Tai Xu believed that this arousal of compassion for others would naturally motivate the individual to take action to benefit other people and work to create a Pure Land on Earth.[4] This is the basis for the title of Living Bodhisattva that Cheng Yen grants all those who participate in Tzu Chi's missions. During China's early Republican period, when Tai Xu was just beginning his spiritual journey, extreme acts of both terrorism and heroism were prevalent as various factions vied for control of China's destiny.[5] Such acts of heroism, carried out by those seeking to save others from the suffering of civil war, may have reminded Tai Xu of the stories of legendary bodhisattvas in the sutras, beings who denied their own release from the cyclic existence of samsara to help others. This is the kind of compassionate action Tai Xu hoped to see mirrored in practitioners of this new Buddhism, a quality which today characterizes Tzu Chi' Living Bodhisattva-practitioners.

In 1919, to further his efforts to reorganize the sangha and promote the education of "new monks," *viz*. monks educated on and supportive of his vision, Tai Xu founded the Bodhi Society in Shanghai. Soon after, he began to serve as editor for the organization's publication, *Hăicháo yīn* 海潮音, which quickly gained an immense readership and became highly influential during the Republican period.[6] Of course, the success and recognition Tai Xu's organization gained from the beginning reflects how influential, though controversial, his ideas were. However, as it relates to the topic at hand, the literature published on and by the Bodhi Society more deeply

[3] Ibid., 198.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid., 21.
[6] Ibid., 93.

reveals Tai Xu's vision of practitioners' place in his reformed Buddhism. An examination of the by-laws of the Bodhi Society provides probably the most straightforward presentation of his expectations for practitioners participating in his vision of a Humanistic Buddhism. In the section of required practices, the by-laws state that it was required of all members:

1. To take refuge in the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha and take the Four Great Vows of a bodhisattva to make definite one's faith and resolve.

2. To observe the ten great precepts for the laity as found in the *Brahmajâla Sûtra.* If a member is not immediately able to observe all of the precepts, then he should select one or two of them and gradually increase the number until he is in compliance with all the right actions.

3. To reflect on perfect knowledge, investigate the essence of the mind, study the Buddhist scriptures, and practice bodhisattva behavior in order to develop your own wisdom.[7]

These three precepts provide a clear picture of the expectations Tai Xu placed on those who wished to participate in his vision of Humanistic Buddhism. The association of practitioners with the bodhisattva, as a form of religious identity, is also particularly clear in the first and second of these items. In particular, the Four Great Vows (*sì hóng shì yuàn* 四弘誓願) mentioned in the first item are particularly relevant to the transmission of these ideals into the modern spiritual practice of Tzu Chi Buddhism. One of the earliest appearances of these vows in the lineages of Chinese Buddhism is the *Sixth Patriarch's Jeweled Platform Sutra*, canonically said to be composed by the sixth patriarch of the Chan tradition, Hui Neng (638-713).[8] Given Tai Xu's early association with Chan Buddhism, the inclusion of these vows in the Bodhi Society's by-laws seems natural. While little more than the spirit of the remaining by-laws remains intact today, the Four Great Vows are still frequently invoked as part of Tzu Chi's regular liturgy. In the Tzu Chi school of Buddhism, these vows serve as a primary mode of expression for Tzu

[7] Ibid., 92.
[8] T.48.2008.0346c

Chi's followers to profess their faith and dedication to the organization's missions. As they are formulated in Tzu Chi's translation conventions, the Four Great Vows are as follows:

> I vow to deliver countless sentient beings – (*Zhòngshēng wúbiān shìyuàn dù* 眾生無邊誓願度)
>
> I vow to eliminate endless afflictions – (*Fánnǎo wújìn shìyuàn duàn* 煩惱無盡誓願斷)
>
> I vow to learn infinite Dharma-doors – (*Fǎmén wúliàng shìyuàn xué* 法門無量誓願學)
>
> I vow to attain unsurpassed Buddhahood – (*Fú dào wú shàng shìyuàn chéng* 佛道無上誓願成)

These vows represent an important facet of practitioner identity in the development of Humanistic Buddhism. Notably, the first vow emphasizes helping others as the focus Buddhist spiritual practice with its exhortation to "deliver countless sentient beings." This directly mirrors the emphasis on showing concern for this-worldly matters that Tai Xu stressed so heavily in his efforts to reform late-Qing period Buddhism.

Through the late 19th century, most Chinese monasteries remained economically dependent on the laity who occupied the surrounding lands and provided rental income to support the resident monastics. Many of these temples also benefited financially from charging a profit to conduct funerary rites, which Tai Xu viewed as a serious deviation from true Buddhist practice.[9] Due to increasingly restrictive legislation in the early 20th century, along with direct competition from the increasing popularity of Christianity, Chinese Buddhism faced serious issues during the early Republican period. This decline concerned Tai Xu, causing him to take a stance against these traditional forms of monastic subsistence. As part of his vision of a new Buddhism, he sought to end the sangha's economic dependence, arguing instead that monks should focus on providing beneficial services to the lay community. He believed that, considering the turbulent social and political scene of the Republican era, it was more important

[9] Ibid., 96.

than ever for Buddhism to serve a beneficial role in society. In his *Explanation of a Buddhism for Human Life* (*Rénshēng fójiaò de shuōmíng* 人生佛教的說明), Tai Xu argued that the substance (*tǐ* 體) of Buddhism's spiritual ideals needed to be directly applied to the work of benefitting society so as not to lose its function (*yòng* 用).[10]

While the first vow reveals the broad project of relieving the suffering of others, the second vow emphasizes the need for personal spiritual cultivation. Following naturally from the first vow, the second focuses on "afflictions" as the source of sentient beings' suffering. This focus on eliminating afflictive emotional and mental states ties back to Buddhism's earliest teachings about the nature of suffering, and specifically, that it is born from sentient beings' habituated reactions to external conditions.[11] This second vow returns to the idea that the project of relieving suffering must take place in the grounds of one's mind, by eliminating the emotional and mental obstacles that cause all sentient beings to suffer. Moreover, the ambiguity of whose afflictions are to be eliminated suggests that practitioners are to eliminate their own afflictions while also helping others to eliminate theirs. While the first vow might suggest a more coarse-grained approach to relieving sentient beings' suffering by amending their external conditions, the second vow also shows that this project requires practitioners' introspection and internal spiritual cultivation as well. This is the most prevalent interpretation of this vow in Tzu Chi Buddhism. A common phrase Cheng Yen uses in her Dharma-talks is "*zìlì lìtā* 自利利他," meaning to simultaneously benefit oneself and others. Most often, this is used to refer to the benefits of helping others through Tzu Chi's missions; by volunteering one's time and effort to

[10] Taixu, "Rensheng fojiao de shuoming" (An Explanation of a Buddhism for Human Life), in Taixu dashi quanshu (Complete Works), 2.5.17: 206.
[11] Siderits, Mark. *Buddhism as Philosophy*: *An Introduction*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2007, pp 18–21.

helping others, one is also creating beneficial karmic outcomes for oneself by eliminating the afflictions and ignorance that perpetuate self-centered approaches to life.

In sequence, the third vow reveals the method by which practitioners can undertake this project of relieving the suffering that results from afflictions. In Tzu Chi, Cheng Yen associates the idea of "learning infinite Dharma-doors" with the Buddha's use of *upaya*, or skillful means (*fāngbiàn fǎ* 方便法). The idea is that the Buddha adapted his teachings to meet the differing spiritual needs of his followers. Canonically, the earliest Buddhist discourses feature the Buddha addressing a specific person or group of people who are facing common (or sometimes not-so-common) worldly problems.[12] In these early sutras, the Buddha is not depicted as being overly concerned with expressing generalized doctrinal truths. Rather, the responses to these issues that are attributed to him are very direct and specific. In later centuries, Mahāyānists largely classified these earlier discourses as skillful means that communicated the broader truths of the Dharma by using specific examples that were relevant to the life of the individual in question. For practitioners of Tai Xu's Humanistic Buddhism, this method for applying Buddhist teachings was interpreted in terms of their efforts to help others. This is the interpretation that is most prevalent in Tzu Chi as well. When conducting volunteer work, Cheng Yen encourages volunteers to focus on meeting the specific material needs of those they are helping, rather than directly proselytizing Buddhist teachings.[13] Thus, "learning infinite Dharma-doors" refers to the myriad ways in which Tzu Chi's volunteers should work to address the widely varied needs of others. In the next chapter, this idea will be examined it greater detail.

The fourth vow also relates very specifically to the mission of the canonical bodhisattvas, and thus reflects a final goal for Tzu Chi's practitioners. The concept of "unsurpassed

[12] See, Holder (ed.), *Early Buddhist Discourses*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2006).
[13] Cheng Yen, *Wondrous Lotus Sutra Episodes*, no. 708.

buddhahood," or *annutarā-samyak-saṃbodhi* in Sanskrit, has a very particular meaning for many branches of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Cheng Yen often contrasts this level of enlightenment with the "limited" or "selfish" enlightenment achieved by the *śravaka*s (*shēngwén* 聲聞, those who attain liberation by listening to the Dharma) and *pratyekabuddha*s (*yuánjué* 緣覺, those liberated by observing and reasoning about the processes of life).[14] A common implication entailed in this claim is that these other practitioners only care about attaining awakening for their own benefit and therefore avoid going among people for fear of interrupting their spiritual progress. Another is that because these practitioners solely engage in meditation and merely listen to Buddhist teachings, they fail to gain an experiential understanding of the nature of life and the universe that is to be found amidst worldly life.[15] For early practitioners of Humanistic Buddhism, this would have represented a shift from their traditional forms of monastic subsistence to a focus on actively working to benefit the lay community. This idea has evolved, in the case of Tzu Chi, into a belief that only by constantly helping others over many countless lifetimes can the Living Bodhisattva-practitioner hope to achieve this level of enlightenment.

These four vows encompass, in a very broad way, the entirety of the mission that practitioners of Tai Xu's humanistic Buddhism were expected to undertake. As a related observation, their structure also appears to reflect the Four Noble Truths, the basic Buddhist teaching that serves as a gateway into all of the Buddha's other teachings about the nature of life in the "saha-world" (*suōpó shìjiè* 娑婆世界), the world that requires endurance. In a similar way, these four vows address the suffering of sentient beings, the cause of their suffering, the method

[14] This schema for classifying Buddhist practitioners features strongly in Mahāyāna rhetoric which seeks to position its own schools' approaches to spiritual practice as superior to those of the Theravadin schools in South and South East Asia.
[15] Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy*, 142–3.

for alleviating it and the ultimate result of engaging in this mission of alleviation. At a basic level, these vows, as they are interpreted in Tzu Chi Buddhism, require practitioners to work towards relieving others' suffering, to engage in long-term spiritual cultivation, to learn and implement Buddhist teachings creatively, and to work at this mission ceaselessly. Thus, the qualities of compassionate action, spiritual cultivation, creatively applying the Dharma and working tirelessly that characterized the work of Tai Xu's Humanistic Buddhists have been retained and developed through Tzu Chi. The position of these vows among the precepts taken by Tzu Chi's Living Bodhisattvas indicates their continued importance in defining their religious identity.

The Influence of Yin Shun

While Tai Xu is widely credited with the inception of what is known today as Humanistic Buddhism, his student, Yin Shun, is known for expanding its philosophical foundation. Together, their most visible legacy has been the work of groups like Tzu Chi, which have developed from the common elements of their vision. However, their approaches to the study and promotion of Buddhism differed considerably. While Tai Xu's life was characterized by political action, by contrast, Yin Shun characterized himself as someone who preferred the quietude of academic study.[16] His early mostly self-directed education concentrated heavily on philosophical and religious literature, and after deciding to become a monk at the age of 24, he traveled south to study at Tai Xu's South Fujian Seminary.[17] As a gifted student, Yin Shun developed a close relationship with Tai Xu, serving as his primary biographer later in life. Given his propensity for academic study, Yin Shun became a prolific writer, contributing a host of volumes on a broad

[16] Pittman, *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism*, 267.
[17] Ibid., 266.

range of Buddhist philosophical subjects. It is from these writings that the majority of Cheng Yen's teachings and philosophical perspectives are derived.

While Tai Xu may be credited for providing the spirit which animates Humanistic Buddhism, Yin Shun is recognized as having fleshed out the humanistic position on teachings from the three major divisions of Buddhism as they were known in China. According to Yin Shun, the three primary divisions of Buddhist philosophy are the Empty Nature Mere Name system (Madhyāmāka), the False Imagination Mere Consciousness system (Yogācāra/ Vijñaptimātra), and the Truly Eternal Mere Mind system (Tathāgatagarbha).[18] Having thoroughly studied the works of Buddhist teachers belonging to all three of these branches, Yin Shun's contribution to Humanistic Buddhism was primarily the exegesis and integration of ideas from all three, by explaining them in terms of Tai Xu's vision of an actively engaged Buddhism. As Cheng Yen's teacher, many of his ideas have become an integral part of Tzu Chi philosophy. One of the concepts on which Yin Shun elaborates most extensively is the intrinsic nature of True Suchness (*zhēnrú běnxìng* 真如本性), as it is called in Tzu Chi's teachings. This "intrinsic nature" is another name for a concept often referred to as buddha nature (*fóxìng* 佛性) or *tathāgatagarbha* (*rúláizàng* 如來藏).[19] Yin Shun's work, *A Study of the* Tathāgatagarbha (*Rúláizàng zhī yánjiū* 如來藏之研究), surveys 16 sutras and three treatises that specifically address or make mention of the intrinsic nature of True Suchness, or *tathāgatagarbha*. Delving deeply into this concept, Yin Shun's work contains an understanding of this concept that has an

[18] Yin Shun, *The Way to Buddhahood*, (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2008), 303.
[19] Seemingly contrary to the Indian Buddhist philosophical emphasis that all beings necessarily lack a permanent self-nature, or *svabhāva*, a belief in the presence of an original enlightened- or buddha-nature in all beings was commonplace among Chinese Buddhists of Tai Xu's day. This teaching features heavily in Tzu Chi doctrine.

important bearing on practitioner identity in Tzu Chi Buddhism. The first chapter of his work begins:

> As for the *tathāgatagarbha, tathāgata-dhātu, tathāgata*-nature, *Buddha*-nature, *Buddha-dhātu* and so on, [all] nouns in this class, while superficially different, refer to the potential to attain Buddhahood. The fundamental natures of sentient beings and the Buddha cannot be said to be two,[20] [for] they possess an identical significance.[21]
>
> 如來藏，如來界——如來性，佛性——佛界 等，這一類名詞，在意義上雖有多少的差別，然作為成佛的可能性，眾生與佛的本性不二來說，有著一致的意義。

In another work, called the Way to Buddhahood (*Chéngfó zhī dào* 成佛之道), Yin Shun goes on to delineate this concept of the intrinsic nature in greater depth. Here, he defines buddha-nature in two ways, as absolute buddha-nature (*lǐ xìng* 理性) and functional buddha-nature (*xíng xìng* 行性), a distinction he attributes to "an old Indian explanation."[22] While he does not specifically cite his source for this division, he implies that absolute buddha-nature corresponds to Nāgārjuna's Madhyāmāka teachings, while functional, or developmental buddha-nature corresponds to those of the *Vijñaptimātra* (*wéishí* 唯識) school, the division of Mahāyāna Buddhism based on Yogācāra idealism. Beginning with absolute buddha-nature, he explains:

> "What is absolute buddha-nature? [This refers to the fact that] all phenomena are fundamentally without *svabhāva*, meaning that their nature is inherently void and tranquil. Lacking a nature of their own, they are therefore empty, meaning that the nature of phenomena neither arises [independently] nor ceases [entirely]. If phenomena had *svabhāva* and their nature was not empty, then people would be permanently ordinary and would remain forever unenlightened; [likewise], defilements would also exist permanently. That which has arisen would be unable to be transformed, and that which has not already arisen could not arise, meaning [afflictions] could not be eliminated, there would be [no Dharma] to practice, and [no one] would be able to attain buddhahood (as [Nāgārjuna] says in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā).*[23]
>
> 什麼叫理佛性？一切法是從本以來無自性的，也就是本性空寂的。[…] 這無性即空、空即不生滅的法性，可稱為佛性的。因為如一切法是有自性的、不是性空的，那麼，凡夫是實有的，將永遠是凡夫；雜染是實有的，將永遠是雜染；已經現起的不能轉無，沒有現起的不能轉有，那就是無可斷、無可修，也就不可能成佛了（如《中論》說）。

[20] I.e., different from each other.
[21] Yin Shun, *Rulaizang Zhi Yanjiu*, (Taipei: Zhengwen Publishing, 1992), Ch. 1, sec. 1.
[22] Yin Shun, *The Way*, 214: "二佛性是印度舊說."
[23] Ibid., 214–15.

Absolute buddha-nature thus refers to the absolute potential of all beings to attain buddhahood. As explained above, this absolute buddha-nature is simply another way of saying that sentient beings necessarily lack a permanent unchanging nature, which makes transformation through spiritual practice possible. This means that all beings are potentially able to become buddhas due to this fundamental property. This facet of buddha-nature is most commonly invoked in those of Cheng Yen's Dharma-talks that focus on expounding the principle of emptiness. For example, Cheng Yen says jokingly, "Where is your nature of True Suchness? Take it out and show it to me!"[24] This locution highlights the idea that buddha-nature is not a material existent but rather a fundamental potential that is possessed by all beings due to their ultimately empty nature.

As for functional buddha-nature, Yin Shun explains:

> [And] what is functional buddha-nature? This is the causal nature for attaining buddhahood that arises in dependence on making vows and engaging in spiritual practice. As the *Vijñaptimātra* [school] teaches, it depends on "immersing oneself in [the Dharma] which flows from all Dharma-realms," which become the seeds of Buddhahood. In the *Lotus Sutra*, when it refers to "buddha-seeds arising in dependence on conditions," it is referring to functional buddha-nature.[25]
>
> 什麼叫行佛性？這是依修習發心而成為成佛的因性。如唯識者說：依『法界等流』的『聞熏習』，成為成佛的種子。《法華經》的『佛種從緣起』，也就是約行性說的。

Here, Yin Shun explains functional buddha-nature as the causal nature for attaining Buddhahood in those who have begun the process of spiritual practice. Only through this process of spiritual cultivation, he says, can sentient beings bring their innate potential for buddhahood to fruition. While absolute buddha-nature is considered to be the fundamental potential for all beings to attain enlightenment, Yin Shun suggests that functional buddha-nature is comprised of the actual steps that one takes to move in that direction. In Cheng Yen's Dharma-talks, she commonly

[24] Cheng Yen, *Wondrous Lotus*, no. 1399.
[25] Yin Shun, *The Way*, 215.

adopts the classical imagery which likens the functional buddha-nature to a seed that matures through attentive cultivation. Because spiritual practice for Tzu Chi's Living Bodhisattvas consists primarily in actively engaging with other people, the seeds at the center of this metaphor most commonly refer to the good karma that is accrued through doing good deeds. In this way, practitioner identity, and in particular the picture of one's role in this life and one's fate in future lifetimes, is strongly tied to this delineation of buddha-nature.

In Cheng Yen's Dharma-talks, she occasionally switches between these two depictions of buddha-nature, alluding to both of Yin Shun's definitions. However, she does not distinguish between them in name. Instead, she uses "buddha-nature" or "intrinsic nature of True Suchness" as all-encompassing terms, while attributing the characteristics of the absolute and functional buddha-natures to both. While they do not differ in name in her Dharma-talks, the characteristics Cheng Yen attributes to this intrinsic nature concept based on Yin Shun's definitions each carry their own implications for the way that the Living Bodhisattva identity is constructed. Those of her Dharma-talks which focus on the principle of "emptiness" emphasize the absolute buddha-nature definition given above. This concept, most extensively addressed by Madhyāmāka philosophers like Nāgārjuna, is typically employed in her discussions of craving (*yù* 欲). Most often, she describes the idea of craving in terms of attachment to one's self-image, to loved ones, or to particular ways of thinking and being.

One of the primary focuses of early Buddhist critique was the Hindu concept of *ātman*, or an eternal unchanging selfhood, similar to the concept of a soul in the Abrahamic traditions.[26] Yin Shun's explanation of absolute buddha-nature neatly summarizes the Buddhist argument against this concept; if sentient beings possessed such an immutable selfhood, they would be

[26] Holder, *Early Buddhist Discourses*, 26.

unable to change from a state of ignorance to a state of enlightenment. Likewise, with regard to material objects or abstract sets of circumstances, their lack of a permanent nature suggests that it is futile to remain attached to them as they will eventually pass out of existence. In Tzu Chi, this focus on relinquishing one's attachments is framed in terms of releasing one's selfish modes of living in favor of a life that is dedicated to serving others. She teaches that releasing these attachments means that practitioners can give generously and sacrifice their own self-interests for the sake of others. These are qualities directly attributed to the bodhisattva-practitioners that Yin Shun describes.[27]

Yin Shun's second definition, the notion of functional buddha-nature, has its own important bearing on practitioners' role in Tzu Chi's brand of Humanistic Buddhism. First, it will be useful to investigate the seed metaphor that both Yin Shun and Cheng Yen use to describe this facet of buddha-nature in greater detail. According to Yin Shun, this way of conceptualizing buddha-nature comes from the *Vijñaptimātra*, or consciousness-only school, which stems from Yogācāra philosophy. At a basic level, Yogācārin philosophers attempted to explain the empty nature of phenomena as it is expounded in the *prajnaparamita* sutras by developing their own model of cognition and consciousness. Thus, the name "consciousness only" refers to the *Vijñaptimātra* model of the mind, which includes the eight consciousnesses theory. On top of the six sense-consciousnesses traditionally delineated by Buddhist metaphysicians (the five senses plus mind-consciousness), Yogācārins postulated the existence of a seventh and eighth consciousness, the latter of which takes in and stores karmic "seeds," or *bīja*. These *bīja* develop over time, growing into karmic fruits, or *phala*, which may mature in

[27] Yin Shun, *The Way*, 218.

this lifetime or the next.[28] For many Mahāyāna schools, this Yogācārin idea explains how karma is able to follow an individual across multiple lifetimes. According to Yin Shun, the goal of a practitioner's spiritual practice must be to purify the seventh, or *Amāla* consciousness of the afflictions which cause it to appropriate the eighth consciousness, or *Alayā* consciousness, as if it were a self. This is how practitioners are supposed to be able to reveal the *tathāgatagarbha*, or intrinsic nature of True Suchness, and attain enlightenment.[29]

This is the process of personal purification that is most closely associated with the notion of functional buddha-nature. There are two primary implications of this understanding as it is incorporated in Tzu Chi philosophy. The first is simply that one must practice diligently to purify the *bīja* that defile the intrinsic nature of True Suchness. This means that one must actively guard one's behavior according to the bodhisattva precepts, while working hard to create good karma by practicing the Six Pāramitās.[30] In this sense, Cheng Yen's teachings are directly reflective of the kind of spiritual practice discussed in terms of the Four Great Vows above. However, the second implication of this teaching is that all beings are equally endowed with this nature, and that through the practice of giving, others who were previously suffering are able to cultivate a mindset of gratitude, which will ultimately enable them to reveal their own buddha-nature.

This is the foundational concept that underlies all of Tzu Chi's missions. By engaging in charitable actions, one is able to nurture the conditions by which others may ultimately benefit by progressing towards liberation from worldly suffering. This reflects Yin Shun's definition of a bodhisattva, as anyone who seeks to cultivate the awakening of *bodhicitta*, or in other words,

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[28] Lusthaus, Dan, "Yogācāra Theories of the Components of Perception," in *Buddhist Philosophy Essential Readings*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 206.
[29] Yin Shun, *The Way*, 321.
[30] The six practices of a bodhisattva as explained in sources such as Śantideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*: giving, observing the precepts, and cultivating patience, diligence, *Samādhi* and wisdom.

anyone who seeks to reveal the intrinsic nature of True Suchness in themselves and others. Here, the traditional notion of a bodhisattva dovetails neatly with both Tai Xu's and Yin Shun's interpretations of the role practitioners of Humanistic Buddhism ought to play in the world at large. Following in their footsteps, Cheng Yen has also adopted this interpretation, and she applies the title of Living Bodhisattva liberally to all those who volunteer to undertake compassionate action for the sake of others.

Cheng Yen and the Tzu Chi Foundation

At this point, it is possible to provide some contextual framework for the Tzu Chi Foundation and Cheng Yen's own lineage of teachings. Within the history of Chinese Buddhism, Cheng Yen's Tzu Chi teachings are a product of Chan heritage, and they are characterized by similar approaches to spiritual practice, e.g. a deemphasis on scriptural study. Tai Xu's beginnings as a Chan monk and his utopian vision of creating a Pure Land on Earth are clearly reflected in the ideals that Cheng Yen emphasizes, as well as in the objectives of Tzu Chi's missions. More specifically, Tzu Chi exists as an offshoot of Tai Xu's Humanistic Buddhism, the philosophy of which was directly transmitted to her by her teacher, Yin Shun. Tzu Chi can also be positioned among the ranks of other human-centered Buddhist groups, both in Taiwan and abroad. Locally, Foguang Shan, led by another of Yin Shun's disciples, Xing Yun, is one of the only organizations on the island that can compare in scope to Tzu Chi, though it is smaller. Foguang Shan, however, occupies a slightly different niche in Taiwanese society,[31] as a primarily religious entity which seeks to establish strong cooperation between its distinctive lay and monastic communities.[32] While Foguang Shan, like most other Taiwanese Buddhist

[31] Jones, *Buddhism in Taiwan*, 208.
[32] Tzu Chi, on the other hand, is a dominantly lay-organization which tends to encourage lay-engagement in its charitable missions over monastic participation in its religious tradition.

organizations, encourages volunteerism in line with Tai Xu's ideals, it lacks the extensive network of charitable services that characterizes Tzu Chi's presence on the island. Tzu Chi also falls among schools that take the Lotus Sutra as their central text. While there appear to be mainly nominal differences between Tzu Chi's interpretation of the text's central teachings compared to Chinese schools like Tiantai, for example, the primary difference is the way that Cheng Yen adapts them to the specific missions that her followers engage in.

Cheng Yen's own life circumstances also help to explain the inspiration behind the establishment of the Tzu Chi Foundation. Early in her spiritual practice, an important mentor of Cheng Yen recounted to her the story of a visit to a Buddhist monastery in Japan. This nun, known as Xiu Dao (修道), had taken particular note of the charity work undertaken by the resident monastics there, as this was an uncommon practice in Taiwanese monasteries at that time. On another occasion, a young Cheng Yen once stayed at Master Xiu Dao's Ciyun Temple (*Cíyún sì* 慈雲寺) in her home city of Fengyuan when she had fallen ill. After observing the temple's nuns deeply involved in their meditation and ritual practices day after day, she decided that this was an imprudent use of their time and energy, and she vowed to one day become a different sort of monastic. Both of these insights as recorded in Cheng Yen's biographies mirror those which inspired Tai Xu's vision of Humanistic Buddhism. Building on these events from her early life, Tai Xu's teachings that had been passed on to her by his disciple Yin Shun, would eventually grow to become the philosophy that underlies the Tzu Chi Foundation.

In 1963, as Cheng Yen sought full monastic initiation, by chance, she encountered the Venerable Yin Shun. The reformer-monk was famous in Taiwan for his scholarship in Buddhist philosophy, and Cheng Yen admired his work. Yin Shun, who typically refused to accept any disciples, initially refused to take her as his student. Eventually, however, he accepted her due to

what he claimed was a strong karmic connection he believed they shared. If the accounts about Cheng Yen's early insights are true, then Yin Shun's statement about their natural affinity makes sense, considering the common ground shared by their ideas. Later, Yin Shun would give Cheng Yen his instruction for her to work "for Buddha's teachings, for sentient beings" (*wèi fójiào, wèi zhòngshēng* 為佛教，為眾生). These six characters are invariably mentioned in accounts of Tzu Chi's founding, and their message of working to spread the Buddha's teachings to relieve others' suffering is now the spirit which drives the organization's missions.

Three years after her ordination by Master Yin Shun, Cheng Yen would finally embark on the journey of founding Tzu Chi. Returning from her ordination, Cheng Yen lived alone in a small hut behind the temple where she taught. There, she devoted herself to her study of the *Lotus Sutra* and other important Buddhist texts. According to her biographies, Cheng Yen read, recited, transcribed and prostrated to each individual character of these texts during her time in the hut.[33] The *Lotus Sutra* would eventually become the foundational text in the organization's philosophy, which is attributed to Cheng Yen's somewhat mystical connection to this scripture. Stories surrounding Cheng Yen's connection with this sutra border on the fantastical and include such elements as a strong energy she felt when first holding it and a mysterious light emanating from her wooden hut at night as she studied and worshipped it.[34]

Aside from her devotion to the *Lotus Sutra*, Cheng Yen's first few years living in her adoptive city of Hualien, in eastern Taiwan, provided several experiences that strongly influenced the path of her monastic career. Carrying the inspiration of her mentor into her

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[33] Fan, De Shi, *Zhengyan Shangren Sixiang Tixi Tanjiu Congshu*, (Shanghai: Fudan Daxue Chuban She 2011), 27.
[34] Ibid., 33. – These stories mirror a genre of narratives about devotees of the *Lotus Sutra* which appear in both Chinese and Japanese traditions. The mystical qualities of these stories stem from the sutra's claim that reliance on it can produce miraculous outcomes. See *Miraculous Tales of the Lotus Sutra* by Yoshiko K. Dykstra.

experiences of life in Taiwan's rural and underserved eastern community of Hualien, Cheng Yen realized the impact that the lack of medical care was having on the largely disconnected eastern side of the immense island of Taiwan. To Cheng Yen, it became increasingly apparent that the inability to access proper medical care, nor to afford the treatments that were actually available, were primary contributors to the problem of poverty. One instance in particular involved an experience in which, while visiting a hospital, she noticed a large pool of blood on the floor. She learned that the blood was from an aboriginal Taiwanese woman who died because she could not afford the required deposit to receive treatment. Combined with the experience of losing her father to a heart condition, medicine became a primary focus of Tzu Chi's work from the beginning. In another instance, a group of Catholic nuns met with Cheng Yen, potentially to try and convert her. While Cheng Yen found little interest in Christian teachings, she was impressed by their charity work. Thus, according to her biographies, these experiences strengthened her resolve to provide medical services to the needy and to help her impoverished community more directly through charitable services.

The earliest projects that she and her followers took up were to purchase medicine for individuals in their charity network and to bring doctors to Taiwan's eastern coastal communities to hold free clinics. In 1966, Cheng Yen and her followers formally established the Tzu Chi Merit Association in order to advance their efforts to provide care to their impoverished local community. Following in the footsteps of Yin Shun, Cheng Yen also became passionate about the mission of Humanistic Buddhism. Following her understanding of the *Lotus Sutra* as interpreted through the lens of Humanistic Buddhism passed down to her by her teacher, she encouraged her band of 30 housewife-disciples to begin saving NTD.50 (USD $0.02) each day from their grocery money in small bamboo banks. For Cheng Yen, this process of making small,

regular donations emulated the *Lotus Sutra*'s bodhisattva ideal of regularly engaging in good deeds to work continuously at the project of relieving suffering. Tzu Chi's relief fund eventually came to be supplied by these kinds of regular donations from the lay community, while the monastics themselves continued to live on what they could make by selling handicrafts. This practice continues today, and the main plant of Tzu Chi's Abode of Still Thoughts is funded entirely through the products created by the monastics and books of Cheng Yen's teachings, which are all sold in Tzu Chi's JingSi bookstores. The Abode is also self-sustaining, with the majority of the resident nuns' vegetarian diet supplied by the gardens they tend during their 17-hour work day, with no more than 5 hours of sleep and no holidays. This ensures that the organization's funding from lay-donations remains intact to be used specifically for funding disaster relief efforts and other missions.[35]

Today, Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation has established an international presence. Its four main missions, Charity, Medicine, Education, and Humanistic Culture are carried out by millions of its members and volunteers, in accordance with Cheng Yen's vision. A common saying evoked in Tzu Chi gatherings refers to taking "the Buddha's mind as our own and Master's vows as our own" (*fóxīn jǐxīn, shīzhì jǐzhì* 佛心己心 師志己志).[36] In a sense, this phrase encapsulates a much of the Living Bodhisattva identity in Tzu Chi, as it indicates the kind of like-minded pursuit of doing good deeds that Cheng Yen encourages of her followers. The effects of this mindset are evident in what the organization has been able to accomplish in the last several decades. The Tzu Chi Foundation has constructed its own hospitals and a university in Taiwan, schools in several nations around the world, and even its own technology company, DaAi

[35] Yan et al., *Social Entrepreneurship*, 14.
[36] Jones, *Buddhism in Taiwan*, 210.

Technology, with a television station that broadcasts Cheng Yen's teachings through a variety of programming.

Cheng Yen's teachings promote the belief that a bodhisattva can be anyone who actively participates in doing good deeds to serve others, an elaboration of the teachings from her teacher, Yin Shun. This interpretation of the bodhisattva ideal mirrors the ideas about the role of Buddhist practitioners that informed the by-laws of Tai Xu's Bodhi Society examined above. Cheng Yen's philosophy, at the heart of which lies this Living Bodhisattva ideal, has in recent years taken the form of Dharma-talks on the teachings of the *Lotus Sutra*, Tzu Chi's central scripture. The message of the *Lotus Sutra* is interpreted according to the values of Tai Xu's Humanistic Buddhism, and specifically addressed to the work Tzu Chi's volunteers undertake. Integral at all levels of Tzu Chi's missions, the message of the *Lotus Sutra* is utilized to encourage practitioners on their journey along the Bodhisattva-path. Cheng Yen uses these teachings to motivate her followers to engage in Tzu Chi's charitable missions. The next chapter examines how Cheng Yen uses these particular sets of traditional Buddhist teachings to espouse certain qualities and practices to her followers. Tzu Chi's practitioners are thus encouraged to embody these attributes and become Living Bodhisattvas who regularly engage in charitable undertakings as envisioned by Tai Xu and Yin Shun during the first half of the 20th century.

Chapter 2
Living Bodhisattvas: Essential Teachings for Tzu Chi Practitioners

Drawing on the early ideas of Tai Xu and Yin Shun's visions of a human-centered Buddhism, Dharma Master Cheng Yen has created her own representation of the role that she expects her followers to play. At face value, Cheng Yen's exegesis focuses almost exclusively on teachings that are common throughout East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism, particularly among groups which take the *Lotus Sutra* as their central text. However, each of the qualities and practices that she espouses are given a particular flavor as she adapts them to relate specifically to the work Tzu Chi's volunteers undertake. Her Dharma-talks on the *Lotus Sutra*, which today represent the primary source of her interpretation of Buddhist doctrine, draw upon its teachings to create a cohesive message about the kind of identity Tzu Chi practitioners should adopt as they engage in worldly life. Following an analysis of several specific sets of teachings that Cheng Yen regularly emphasizes, this chapter provides an outline of the organization's missions and how these teachings are applied through practitioners' participation in them. It is their regular participation in these missions and their adoption of the qualities and practices Cheng Yen lays out in her Dharma-talks that makes practitioners into Living Bodhisattvas, reflecting the kind of direct correlation between religious identity and religious participation established by Greenfield and Marks.

Even before 1966, when the foundation was established, Cheng Yen was studying and giving Dharma-talks on a range of Buddhist sutras, the *Lotus Sutra* and its preface, often referred to separately as the *Sutra of Infinite Meanings* (*wúliàng yì jīng* 無量意經),[1] foremost among them.[2] These two sutras are by far the most important texts in Tzu Chi Buddhism. In particular,

[1] T.13-II.0276
[2] Fan, *Zhengyan*, 33.

the *Lotus Sutra* has been the subject of Cheng Yen's most current lecture series, begun in 2013, of which her more than 1,600 lectures so far have covered only the first 16 of the its 28 chapters. While this sutra provides a variety of deep philosophical arguments, Cheng Yen's exegesis focuses on adapting its principles to speak to the charitable activities of Tzu Chi practitioners. As such, her lectures on this text provide insight into the construction of practitioner identity in Tzu Chi through the expectations she sets for followers of her interpretation of the *Lotus Sutra*'s bodhisattva-path. For those who follow Cheng Yen's teachings, it is only by engaging in the practices of a bodhisattva that one begins to follow the true path of the Buddha's Dharma. Thus, the principles espoused in the *Lotus Sutra* and *Sutra of Infinite Meanings*, as interpreted by Cheng Yen, play a prominent role in defining the essential qualities and practices of Tzu Chi's Living Bodhisattva-practitioners.

In keeping with the pattern of traditional Buddhist pedagogical methods, the principles Cheng Yen emphasizes are organized in numbered groups. Familiar to most people with a basic knowledge of Buddhist teachings are the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. The mnemonic device represented by these numbered groups is extremely prevalent throughout the core of pan-Buddhist doctrine and includes such groupings as the Three Jewels (*sān bào* 三寶), the Six Realms (*liù dào* 六道), the Eight Sufferings (*bā kǔ* 八苦), and the Twelve Links of Cyclic Existence (*shí'èr yīnyúan* 十二因緣). For the most part, these numbered sets that are central to the teachings of many Buddhist traditions commonly involve lists of substantives, like the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha of the Three Jewels, or lists of statements about the nature of life and the universe, like the Suffering, Causation, Cessation and Path of the Four Noble Truths. As some of the foundational teachings of Buddhism as a whole, these and many more certainly

figure into Cheng Yen's formulation of Humanistic Buddhist teachings and the cosmology that goes along with them.

However, as these particular groupings relate to practitioners' engagement with Tzu Chi's teachings, their importance is relatively deemphasized. Instead, there are several other numbered groups that factor much more importantly into their practice. Bearing in mind the focus of spiritual practice in Tzu Chi Buddhism, which is active engagement in altruistic activities, the numbered sets that Cheng Yen refers to are primarily lists of qualities and practices. Among these, there are the Three Flawless Studies (*sān wúloù xué* 三無漏學), the Four All-Embracing Virtues, (*sì shè fǎ* 四攝法), the Four Infinite Minds (*sì wúliàng xīn* 四無量心), the Six Pāramitās (*liù dù* 六度),[3] and the Ten Precepts (*shí jiè* 十戒).[4] These qualities and practices are the foundation of the Living Bodhisattvas' spiritual practice, and as such, they are integral to the religious identity of Tzu Chi's practitioners.

Three Flawless Studies • 三無漏學

The Three Flawless Studies, as they are called in Tzu Chi teachings, are precepts, (Chn. *jiè* 戒, Skt. *śila*), *Samādhi* (concentration, Chn. *ding* 定) and wisdom (Chn. *huì* 慧, Skt. *prajña*). Often referred to simply as the Three Studies, or *sān xué* 三學 in Chinese, these three practices trace their origins to well before the inception of Buddhism. The need to exercise self-control while practicing virtue, to practice concentration and to develop wisdom are yogic practices that can be found in the Upaniṣads. In Buddhist texts, the Three Studies are mentioned together according to this schema as early as the Āgamas, one of the earliest divisions of sutra literature.[5]

[3] Otherwise referred to in Chinese as 六波羅蜜 *liù bōluómì.*
[4] Included among these are the Four Great Vows (四弘誓願 *Sì hóng shìyuàn*) which were addressed in Chapter I.
[5] Pande, G. C., *Studies in the Origins of Buddhism*, (Delhi: Motilal Banrsidass), 2006, 513.

In the context of Tzu Chi, they are explained as methods for eliminating the afflictions that keep sentient beings bound to cyclic existence in the three realms. Most commonly, Cheng Yen explains the Three Studies as a basic means for revealing one's intrinsic nature of True Suchness.[6]

Beginning with the first of the studies, she explains that abiding by a set of precepts, or disciplines, creates a stable course for the practitioner's life. Once this stability has been established, one's life will become calm and one's mind will become quieter. This quietude of mind is Samādhi, the second of the studies. Having begun this process of quieting the mind, Cheng Yen asserts that the wisdom of the Dharma will begin to become clearer. According to her teachings, all people are inherently endowed with the Dharma, which is equally present in the world around us.[7] When the mind is able to become quiet, the Dharma contained within each person resonates with the Dharmic reality of the outside world, revealing its principles clearly to the practitioner. The ability to discern and comprehend these principles is wisdom, the last of the Three Studies. This process of gradually comprehending all Dharma is equivalent to revealing one's intrinsic nature of True Suchness, which in turn is equivalent to clearing the defiled *bīja* from one's consciousness as described in the Chapter I.

While at first glance the Three Studies appear to have little to do with Tzu Chi's primary mission of volunteer service, they are all intrinsically connected to it. All volunteers are expected to abide by the Ten Precepts (to be addressed below), which are intended to give a sense to structure to their lives. One of Cheng Yen's many aphorisms is "True meditation is quieting the mind in everyday living." With regard to the spiritual practice of her followers, this represents the idea that Samadhi is to be cultivated in the course of one's regular life. For Tzu Chi

[6] Cheng Yen, *Wondrous Lotus Sutra Episodes*, no. 1401.
[7] Ibid., 19–20.

practitioners, this means regular participation in its charitable activities. An example of this idea in Cheng Yen's teachings is the word *dàochǎng* 道場, which many traditions use to refer to a temple or meditation hall. In her Dharma-talks, Cheng Yen adapts this idea to mean anywhere that one engages in spiritual practice. Taking it even further, she says that everywhere one goes should be a *dàochǎng*, meaning that spiritual practice should happen everywhere at all times.[8] Elaborating on this idea, she teaches that it is in the world among people that the principles of Dharmic reality are to be discerned. According to Cheng Yen, cultivating Samadhi in this way results in the kind of compassionate wisdom that the third of the Three Studies refers to. Additionally, the Three Flawless Studies are also encompassed by the Six Pāramitās, making them a fundamental building block of Tzu Chi practice that is inextricably connected to the other practices examined below.

Four All-Embracing Virtues • 四攝法

The Four All-Embracing Virtues are giving (*bushī* 布施), beneficial conduct (*lìxíng* 利行), loving speech (*àiyǔ* 愛語), and working together (*tóngshì* 同事). Cheng Yen explains that the Four All-Embracing Virtues are four of the 18 Distinctive Virtues (*shíbā búgòng* 十八不共) that characterize all buddhas. The other 14 are comprised of the Fourfold Fearlessness (*sì wú suǒ wèi* 四無所畏) and the Ten Powers (*shí lì* 十力).[9] While these other 14 qualities are quasi-supernatural powers and attributes that appear to develop only through particular karmic circumstances, the Four All-Embracing Virtues are practices that all Tzu Chi followers are encouraged to cultivate. This set of practices is ubiquitous to many Buddhist traditions, although the extent to which practitioners are encouraged to embody them varies. In the context of Tzu

[8] Jones, *Buddhism in Taiwan*, 214.
[9] Cheng Yen, *Wondrous Lotus Sutra Episodes*, no. 1330.

Chi, the specific focus of these practices is to lead others towards the Buddha's Dharma. As this applies to the activities of Tzu Chi followers, this effort is framed in terms of recruiting more Living Bodhisattva-practitioners.

The first of these, giving, or *dāna* in Sanskrit, is one of the primary expressions of Buddhist practice throughout the world. Generosity and compassion often appear hand in hand in Cheng Yen's teachings, as these teachings are especially relevant to all practitioners of Humanistic Buddhism. With Tzu Chi's focus on finding pragmatic solutions to worldly problems, the practice of giving represents one of the primary ways that these problems are tackled. For example, when conducting disaster relief missions, both in Taiwan and internationally, the primary mode of offering relief is through giving. On a mission to Hawaii's Big Island to offer disaster relief to survivors of the Kilauea volcanic eruption in August 2018, volunteers distributed blankets and cash cards with values up to hundreds of dollars, according to family size and the need reported by the aid recipients.

Likewise, across the world, in response to a variety of natural and manmade disasters, Tzu Chi ships hundreds of tons of rice, blankets woven with fibers derived from recycled plastics, and many other relief supplies, most of which have been developed and produced by Tzu Chi's DaAi Technology company in Taiwan. While the individual circumstances of each aid recipient may vary widely, Tzu Chi's common practice is to provide food, clothing, bedding, and financial assistance according to the relative need of each person. According to Cheng Yen, this kind of material support is intended to relieve the suffering caused by the trauma of disaster, while also creating good rapport to make Tzu Chi an accepted presence in the community.

Tzu Chi volunteers also often explain the spirit of the bamboo bank initiative[10] as an embodiment of this practice. They hand out cylindrical cardboard banks in which they encourage community members to create their own regular savings to help others in need, as a way of passing on the principle of giving. While this often entails that the small donations from these communities are deposited back into the fund for disaster relief, another example of this principle in practice comes from Myanmar. Farming communities devastated by widespread flooding following a cyclone were given, among other supplies, bags of various kinds of grains to plant when the waters receded. Some of these farmers in turn decided to save handfuls of rice each day to donate to others who were suffering from malnutrition in their communities.[11] While this example deviates from the context of Taiwan, the general principle that underlies this incremental giving is a practice that Cheng Yen highly encourages all Tzu Chi practitioners to embody, whether in terms of small, regular monetary donations, or in other ways as described above.

Hand in hand with the practice of giving is loving speech, with which practitioners are encouraged to create a positive connection with those they encounter. While Cheng Yen discourages direct proselytization, claiming that volunteers can easily misrepresent the Dharma if they are not mindful of the time, place and people to whom they are speaking,[12] she does encourage her followers to educate people about the organization's work. Most commonly, volunteers describe the values that lie at the heart of the organization, like the bamboo bank initiative explained above. According to Cheng Yen, the practice of loving speech is important for maintaining a positive connection with others and creating harmony in society. In general,

[10] In Tzu Chi, this refers to the practice of saving small amounts from one's regular budget, as Cheng Yen's original group of followers did when establishing the Tzu Chi Foundation, described in Chapter I.
[11] Cheng Yen, *Wondrous Lotus Sutra Episodes*, no. 1588.
[12] Cheng Yen, *Wondrous Lotus Sutra Episodes*, no. 708.

Cheng Yen's teachings tend to encourage her followers to be moderate and modest in their personal conduct, and this practice falls in line with this ideal. For Tzu Chi's followers to operate effectively in disaster situations and to connect with communities both in Taiwan and abroad, the ability to moderate one's speech in this way is especially important.

Next is the practice of beneficial conduct. Cheng Yen briefly explains this practice in roughly the same terms as loving speech. Here, efforts made through practitioners' speech to create a positive connection with those they encounter are expanded to include their actions as well. Not only are practitioners encouraged to moderate their speech when interacting with others, the same principle applies to how they should treat them through their actions as well. In a very broad way, the idea of beneficial conduct encompasses the work Living Bodhisattva-practitioners take part in through all of Tzu Chi's missions. For example, taking part in disaster relief efforts or even the work many of Tzu Chi's older volunteers do in its recycling stations could naturally be seen as beneficial, whether to the specific communities they help or to the environment. But this notion of conducting oneself in a beneficial way is supposed to extend to practitioners' everyday lives too, as embodied by the *dàochǎng* idea explained in the previous section. In some ways, the Ten Precepts examined below elaborate on the specific ways that Living Bodhisattvas are encouraged to engage in beneficial conduct. Similar to the idea of loving speech which encourages them to moderate the way they speak to others, practicing beneficial conduct also helps to create positive connections with those they encounter, while also creating a positive image of the organization as a whole.

Last is the practice of "working together," Tzu Chi's conventional translation of *tóngshì* 同事, which captures two broad senses of its meaning. Specifically, within the context of Tzu Chi, working together often takes the form collaboration between volunteers and particular

communities in order to address their specific needs. For example, with regard to disaster relief, different supplies are needed depending on the kind of disaster, and different kinds of work need to be done to restore the impacted community. In Ecuador, where a 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck in 2016, Tzu Chi implemented a cash-for-work program, recruiting members of the community to work together to clean up the disaster area and begin the rebuilding process.[13] For their participation, a fair wage was dispensed in order to incentivize the community members to take part in the recovery process. More generally however, the practice of working together is characterized as adapting to others' capabilities to lead them closer to accepting the Buddha's path. In essence, this means that practitioners are encouraged to adapt their knowledge of the Dharma to meet individuals' specific concerns, as addressed in the section on the Four Great Vows.

With the Four All-Embracing Virtues, the complex relationship that exists between Tzu Chi's Buddhist teachings and the charity work its members and volunteers engage in comes to the forefront. In many ways, Tzu Chi is not shy about displaying its Buddhist foundation. In Taiwan especially, where Buddhism is widely practiced, the combination of charity work and Cheng Yen's teachings fits naturally. However, in the West, particularly in the United States, it appears that Tzu Chi branches have a more difficult time gaining acceptance. As a result, the organization's branding appears to change slightly, in some ways corresponding to David McMahan's claim that modern Buddhist organizations tend to operate according to the Weberian theory of secularization. McMahan explains that many Buddhist groups in the West attempt to position themselves as science-friendly and non-religious in order to better appeal rationalist sensibilities.[14]

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[13] Tzu Chi Foundation, *Tzu Chi Begins Disaster Relief Assessment after Earthquake in Ecuador*, (29 April, 2016).
[14] McMahan, David L., *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 12.

On occasion, I have witnessed some Tzu Chi members claim that they are not part of a religious group when conducting volunteer work. While this seemed misleading to me, it also did not appear to be altogether inaccurate as no attempt was ever made to pass on Buddhist teachings or talk about religious matters of any sort. Along a similar vein, a common way that the organization chooses to express its version of the bodhisattva ideal is that "everyone can be a bodhisattva," regardless of religion, national origin or any other distinguishing factor.[15] In this sense, "-bodhisattva" becomes a suffix that is attached to other identifiers, e.g. "Christian-bodhisattva," "American-bodhisattva" or "recycling-bodhisattva," depending on the situation. The implication of course is that one does not need to be a Buddhist to accept Tzu Chi's approach or to participate in its missions. This idea seems to fit in with the argument that McMahan elaborates using profiles of several American and European "Buddhist sympathizers," who identify with a range of Buddhist teachings based on their impression of universality.[16] This message of universality is indeed integral to many aspects of Cheng Yen's teachings, both in Taiwan and abroad. As this relates to the Four All-Embracing Virtues, when it comes to spreading Buddhist teachings, this is the underlying message that characterizes much of Tzu Chi practitioners' approach.

The Four Infinite Minds and Six Pāramitās • 四無量心與六度

The Four Infinite Minds and Six Pāramitās are listed together in Cheng Yen's book, *The Path to Truth*, as practices espoused in the *Sutra of Infinite Meanings*. In her Dharma-talk, she explains that these two groups together comprise ten of the 32 Marks of the Buddha (*sānshí'èr xiāng* 三十二相).[17] As with the Four All-Embracing Virtues above, these ten qualities are part of

[15] Cheng Yen*, The Path*, 48.
[16] McMahan, *Buddhist Modernism*, 28–30.
[17] Cheng Yen, *Wondrous Lotus Sutra Episodes*, no. 1329.

a larger number that are specifically associated with the attainment of buddhahood. Likewise, while others of the 32 Marks are physical characteristics, such as a pleasing appearance and a clear voice, the Four Infinite Minds and the Six Pāramitās represent qualities that can be cultivated by anyone. As such, all Living Bodhisattva-practitioners are encouraged to cultivate these ten distinct qualities and practices.

The Four Infinite Minds, known in Sanskrit as the *bramavihāra*s, are loving-kindness (*cí* 慈), compassion (*beì* 悲), joy (*xǐ* 喜), and equanimity (*shě* 捨), according to Tzu Chi's translation conventions. While these qualities appear relatively self-explanatory, all four of them possess a particular meaning in the context of Tzu Chi practitioner's religious identity. In her extremely thorough and detailed exegesis of the Lotus Sutra, she commonly proceeds only several characters at a time, breaking each line apart and giving a particular explanation to each word. This approach is relatively typical of Dharma-talks given in many schools, but Cheng Yen focuses specifically on adapting the sutra's teachings to the identity and work of Tzu Chi's practitioners. A typical example from one of her Dharma-talks is presented in condensed form below. In bold is the portion of sutra commentary as it is explained throughout the passage.

> *There are 80,000 afflictions*
> *If those who cultivate their minds and*
> *uphold the precepts*
> *do not see through them clearly,*
> *they will always remain outside the door*
> ***The state of ultimate reality***
> ***is wherever the Dharmakaya resides***
>
> So, "**The state of ultimate reality is wherever the Dharmakaya resides**." "**Ultimate reality**" refers to the true principles, which [are present] wherever the Dharmakaya resides. What form do the true principles take? They [take form] through our actions.
>
> Take Haiti for example. For a period of three years, Haiti was experiencing a drought. Because of this, there were many starving people, so our distribution [efforts] had to be widened, and we needed to undergo an even more detailed process of finding the very poorest families.
>
> On this particular distribution, we had 280 tons of rice to distribute. So, out of all the people who needed rice, we had to select the very poorest 25,000 households. Obviously, this was not an easy

undertaking. For those impoverished people who were now suffering from drought, what they needed most was food to be satiated. To [transport] this precious food to them was truly laborious, but with utmost sincerity, and by exercising great compassion and great wisdom, [volunteers] were able to [hold the relief distribution] there.

These are formless principles, [which] all of these people applied in order to accomplish this great service. This is the "**state of ultimate reality**," [where] the true principles of "boundless loving-kindness" and "sympathetic compassion" were put into action. What do those impoverished Haitian people have to do with us? They matter to us because, with the teachings of "boundless loving-kindness" and "sympathetic compassion" in our hearts, the world is like one big family.

So, "**The state of ultimate reality is wherever the Dharmakaya resides**." This means that, once we have accepted the Dharma and put it into practice, the true principles will advance wherever we reside.

八萬塵勞
修心持戒之士
若不澈見
總屬門外止宿
實相之境
為法身所依處

所以，「**實相之境為，法身所依處**」。「**實相**」就是真理，真理，這個境界就是法身所依的地方。真理到底是什麼形象呢？真理就是在我們身上。

就像海地。有三年的時間，海地是乾旱，所以飢餓的人很多，發放的要再更廣，就要經過很詳細勘查，特別貧困的。

我們這次要發的，是發二百八十噸。所以要能接受到這白米的人，有二萬五千戶的最最特困。可見這是很不容易的一項任務。那裡的貧困的人，在貧困中又受到旱災，現在他們最需要的就是能夠吃得飽。這麼珍貴的營養資糧，要到那個地方，這是經過很大的辛苦，但是是用最虔誠的心，發揮大悲，發揮智慧，在那個地方這樣在付出。

這就是無形的真理，[…] 落實在這麼多人的身上，就完成了這種殊勝的任務。這就是「**實相之境**」，這是真實的道理，是在人的身上動作出來，「無緣大慈」、「同體大悲」。那個海地人那麼貧困，與我們有什麼關係呢？就是有關係，是因為他們「無緣大慈」、「同體大悲」，接受到這樣的法入心，所以天下就是如一家親。

所以，「**實相之境，為法身所依處**」。就是我們已經接受法了，在我們的身體力行中，我們所依止的地方，我們依止法而行處，依止這個真理、法，這樣在進行。[1]

The text in verse form that precedes the transcription of Cheng Yen's explanation above is from a commentary on the *Lotus Sutra,* which is written in the same register as the sutra text

[1] Cheng Yen, *Wondrous Lotus Sutra Episodes*, no. 1284.

itself and thus requires explanation to be comprehensible to the average member of her audience. At the beginning of her Dharma-talk, she reads a short passage from the sutra, before proceeding with her explanation, rarely covering more than a few lines in a single episode. In this case, she uses the example of one of Tzu Chi's missions in Haiti to both expound the qualities that her followers bring into the field and to show how their ability to put these qualities into practice fits into Tzu Chi's doctrinal schema. As is evident from this passage, Cheng Yen explains that volunteers' ability to put "boundless loving-kindness" and "sympathetic compassion" into practice makes the space in which they were conducting this relief distribution into a "state of ultimate reality." The *dharmakaya* mentioned in the opening verse, which translates directly as "Dharma-body," is most commonly conceptualized in Tzu Chi teachings as the entire body of the Buddha's teachings, which is comprised of all the formless principles attributed to him. As Cheng Yen explains, when volunteers are able to put these formless principles into practice, it is as if they are manifesting the Buddha's Dharma-body in the place where they are working. In doing so, according to this passage, they are able to transform this space into a state of ultimate reality, where the Buddha's teachings are brought to fruition through their actions.

Most often, Cheng Yen explains loving-kindness, or *cí* 慈, as the practice of bringing joy and comfort to others. She teaches that the loving-kindness that characterizes Tzu Chi volunteers' work is aimed at being able to provide comfort to others in the midst of their suffering, as in the example of the Haiti relief distribution provided above. In Tzu Chi, a common way of referring to disaster relief work in particular, but to all of Tzu Chi's missions in general, is to say that volunteers are "bringing love" to the people they are helping. The small, regular contributions that people from communities around the world make to Tzu Chi's relief fund are also referred to as "drops of love." According to Cheng Yen, it is the accumulation of

these small, regular donations which enable the large-scale projects, like this relief distribution of 280 tons of rice to 25,000 households, that her Living Bodhisattva-practitioners undertake. This way of characterizing Tzu Chi's missions as an accumulation and outpouring of love is thus an overt reference to the Infinite Mind of loving-kindness.

Next is compassion, or *beì* 悲, which refers to the ability to relieve suffering. Described as the absence of worry, regret or resentment, the Infinite Mind of compassion refers to volunteers' efforts to actively improve the conditions of others. As such, this sense of compassion mirrors the arousal of *bodhicitta* described by Tai Xu, which causes one to seek out ways to help others. This quality also identifies one as a bodhisattva according to Tzu Chi teachings, meaning that compassion is integral to the Living Bodhisattva-practitioner's religious identity. Accordingly, this emphasis on relieving others' suffering is a characteristic part of the work Tzu Chi practitioners undertake through each of the organization's missions.

Xǐ 喜, or joy, refers to the joy practitioners are supposed to experience by being able to alleviate the suffering of others. This is what Cheng Yen refers to as Dharma-joy (*fǎ xǐ* 法喜), a pervasive sense of elation that one experiences after being able to help others. In discussion about the value of practicing giving without expectations (*shě ér wúqiú* 捨而無求), this Dharma-joy is the reward that Cheng Yen defines as the benefit that practitioners receive from engaging in charitable action. Contained within this idea is *shě* 捨, or equanimity. While the word equanimity connotes a state of emotional balance in its common English usage, in Tzu Chi, *shě* 捨 refers to selfless giving. Here, the idea of equanimity relates as a sense of ease (*zìzai* 自在) which enables one to comfortably relinquish or abandon those things that might otherwise become attachments. While this idea of giving is extremely prevalent throughout Buddhist teachings, and especially those espoused by Cheng Yen, it is this sense of peace in giving that

distinguishes *shě* 捨 from other concepts like *bùshī* 布施, also translated as giving, that appears in the Four All-Embracing Virtues above and the Six Pāramitās below. According to Cheng Yen, this sense of ease is cultivated through the elimination of afflictions, which again is to be practiced by going into the world to do good deeds.

The practices of the Six Pāramitās are addressed here alongside the qualities of the Four Infinite Minds because Cheng Yen specifically associates all ten of them with the practice of the Bodhisattva-way. According to Yin Shun's schema of the Dharma of the Three Vehicles,[2] the Dharma of *śravaka*s focuses on the teachings of the Four Noble Truths, while the Dharma of *pratyekabuddha*s focuses on the 12 Links of Cyclic Existence. Those who practice the Dharma of the Bodhisattva Vehicle focus on practicing the Six Pāramitās. This is because a bodhisattva's practice is to help transform other people, delivering them from ignorance to the far shore of enlightenment. This is the meaning of the word *pāramitā* in Sanskrit, "to cross over" or "to reach the other shore."[3]

The Six Pāramitās are translated as giving (*bùshī* 布施), upholding precepts (*chíjiè* 持戒), patience (*rěnrǔ* 忍辱), diligence (*jīngjìn* 精進), *Samādhi* (*chándìng* 禪定), and wisdom (*zhìhuì* 智慧). The integral nature of these six practices is evident in the fact that four of them have already been addressed as part of other groupings. Giving is included in the Four All-Embracing Virtues, while precepts, *Samādhi* and wisdom comprise the Three Flawless Studies. This leaves only patience and diligence. Patience, Tzu Chi's conventional translation of *rěnrǔ* 忍辱, or *kṣānti* in Sanskrit, is alternatively understood as forbearance, and it can be thought of as the ability to patiently bear things like insult and distress or even the unsatisfactory nature of reality

[2] I.e., the particular teachings best suited to each of the three kinds of Buddhist practitioners.
[3] Yin Shun, *The Way*, 225–6.

characterized by the first of the Four Noble Truths.[4] As it relates to the religious identity of Tzu Chi's Living Bodhisattvas, the idea of patience has two main applications. In terms of Tzu Chi's religious outlook, the idea of patience takes on the traditional meaning attributed above. It can refer to the ability to endure disrespect and abuse from others, as expressed in the excerpt from Cheng Yen's Dharma-talk above, or to endure the eons of practice required to attain buddhahood. On the other hand, with regard to Tzu Chi practitioners' charitable activities, patience refers to a willingness to engage in long-term projects and the ability to take all necessary measures to ensure that they are accomplished correctly.

An example of this quality of patience in action is the long-term planning required to rebuild particularly devastated communities or to provide long-term care for groups like Syrian refugees. In Turkey, where many refugees have fled, Tzu Chi was able to purchase and renovate a multi-story building that has been turned into a school for Syrian children. Tzu Chi volunteers also worked to recruit refugees who had been educators in Syria prior to the civil war to serve as teachers in the school. This project, which began in 2015, finally culminated in official recognition of the school at the end of 2018, and 1,600 students are currently in attendance.[5]

Similarly, *jīngjìn* 精進, or diligence, also has two applications, one religious and one practical. In terms of Cheng Yen's religious teachings, diligence refers to the kind of diligent practice discussed in the first chapter with regard to the Four Great Vows. In order to fully apprehend the Dharma and reveal one's intrinsic nature of True Suchness, practitioners need to seek the Dharma diligently. Cheng Yen contrasts her teachings about the importance of diligence

[4] Buswell, *Dictionary of Buddhism*, 1,883.
[5] Tzu Chi Foundation, *A School for Syrian Children in Istanbul Becomes Official*, (13 December, 2018).

by admonishing her followers against indolence (*xiè dài* 懈怠). What follows is another example from her Dharma-talks:

> Because we eternally [seek the Dharma] with utmost sincerity, naturally the complete bodies of all Buddhas will manifest [before us]. [Seeking the Dharma] in this way requires us to search diligently, so we cannot be indolent. We [need to] seek the Dharma very reverently, and we must not be indolent, which is why [the sutra says], "without indolence." This will enable us to continuously sustain the Dharma in this world forever and bring to fruition "the dignified power of Samadhi and wisdom."
>
> 因為我們永遠的誠意，誠意方殷，自然諸佛現全身。這種方殷，就是殷勤精進、不懈怠，我們很虔誠在求法，不懈怠，所以「不懈怠所感」，讓我們能不斷將這個法這樣永恆在人間，成就的就是「定慧力莊嚴」。

In terms of practitioners' work in Tzu Chi's missions, diligence is a natural partner to the concept of patience explained above. Aside from embodying patience as they undertake long-term service projects, Tzu Chi's Living Bodhisattvas are also supposed to work as diligently and efficiently as possible so that no time is wasted. This is reflected in the work day of the resident nuns at the Abode described previously, as well as in the work that volunteers undertake elsewhere, which indicates the salience of this attribute as part of their religious identity. As Cheng Yen explains,

> When we form our initial aspiration [to help others], we start out thinking, "I must be diligent, I must be diligent." But if we want to be diligent, do we merely think about it? Only when we begin to take action can we call ourselves "diligent." We must begin to act with our bodies, otherwise we will merely be sitting around talking about how we want to be diligent, without ever leaving our seats. Likewise, "goodness in body" requires us to "take action and earnestly uphold all good Dharma." We must set to work doing all good deeds right away.
>
> 我們既發心了，初發心，開始那念心，「我要精進，我要精進」。而要精進，光念要精進嗎？起而身體力行，這樣才是叫做「精進」。身就要起行動，要不然光是坐在那裡說話，光是坐在那裡說要精進還是原地不動。同樣，「身善」要起而「身體力行，勤行修持諸善法」。要趕快，所有的善我們一定要做。[6]

[6] Cheng Yen, *Wondrous Lotus Sutra Episodes*, no. 1601.

Ten Precepts • 十戒

While each of the teachings examined above are deeply rooted in the historical doctrine of Mahāyāna Buddhism, Tzu Chi's Ten Precepts represent an innovation of the precepts found commonly throughout many Buddhist communities. Taking precepts always has been an important part of Buddhism, originating in Hindu practice as mentioned previously. Traditionally there are five precepts commonly upheld by Buddhists of both the monastic and lay communities. While there are a set of Ten Bodhisattva Precepts, mentioned in the by-laws of Tai Xu's Bodhi Society as being derived from the *Brahmajala Sutra*, only the first five are mirrored in Tzu Chi's formulation. The other five are specific to the organization and address how Cheng Yen's followers should approach a variety of situations commonly encountered in modern life. In order, Tzu Chi's Ten Precepts can be construed as follows:

1. To refrain from killing or causing harm
2. To refrain from stealing or taking what is not freely given
3. To refrain from sexual misconduct and immorality
4. To refrain from lying, flattery, insincerity and gossip
5. To refrain from consuming alcohol
6. To refrain from smoking, using narcotics or chewing betel nut
7. To refrain from gambling or engaging in high-risk speculation
8. To be filial to one's family, especially one's parents, and moderate in speech and attitude
9. To abide by all traffic laws and to drive mindfully
10. To refrain from participating in political demonstrations to preserve Tzu Chi's political neutrality[7]

[7] Tzu Chi Foundation, *The Spirit of Tzu Chi's Ten Precepts*, (28 July, 2011).

The first precept bears particular importance in Tzu Chi as it is emblematic of the organization's vegetarian initiative. Not killing or causing harm to other sentient beings includes not only refraining from directly injuring people or animals but also from eating meat or engaging in activities that indirectly cause harm to others. Tzu Chi branch offices sponsor healthy eating days, and volunteers educate others about the benefits of vegetarianism. Tzu Chi's promotion of vegetarianism is also intrinsically linked to its environmental protection initiative, and videos produced by the organization encourage a vegetarian diet as a means for combatting climate change. All of these issues fall under the first precept as they all relate to preserving life and preventing harm to others.

The second and third precepts are not often given particular attention in Cheng Yen's teachings, outside of general statements about morality. The third of the pan-Buddhist Five Precepts deals with sexual misconduct, under which homosexuality is sometimes categorized by some Buddhist leaders, like the Dalai Lama XIV.[8] Such a perspective assumes that proper sexual conduct between monogamous partners is only "proper" when it involves heterosexual contact with a procreative purpose. However, this precept has never been explicitly interpreted this way in Tzu Chi, which is sometimes considered to be a relatively socially conservative organization. This silence perhaps mirrors the relatively equally mixed perception of this issue among Buddhists throughout East Asia.[9] Officially, the organization has no position on this issue, and there is no published or publicized evidence of anti-gay bias or discrimination. Moreover, the burgeoning LGBTQ+ movement in Taiwan and the push to legalize same-sex marriage in recent years also makes this issue a political one, potentially indicating the reason that no position,

[8] Peskind, Steve and Donald Miller, *What's up with the Dalai Lama?* QNotes, April 15, 2005, Accessed April 21, 2019. https://web.archive.org/web/20050415214629/http://www.qnotes.com/top01_040905.html
[9] Adamczyk, Amy, *Cross-National Public Opinion about Homosexuality*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 159–60.

favorable or not, has been established. Instead, this precept is typically addressed in Cheng Yen's Dharma-talks in the form of stories of infidelity between spouses. This is the kind of sexual immorality, she says, that destroys families and destabilizes society. Viewed from this perspective, the issue of sexual immorality becomes a problem of infidelity, which is discouraged of Tzu Chi's practitioners.

Issues relating to the fourth precept are typically addressed by Cheng Yen's exhortation to be sincere in thought, word and deed. Sincerity is a common topic in Cheng Yen's Dharma-talks, and it plays an important role in the image the organization tries to portray as a whole. Of the "inner practices" (*nèi xiū* 內修) that she encourages her followers to cultivate, sincerity (*chéng* 誠) is the first, followed by integrity (*zhèng* 正), faith (*xìn* 信), and steadfastness (*shí* 實). Sincerity, she says, is crucial for making a long-term commitment[10] to engage in the spiritual practice of helping others. Moreover, it is only with a sincere mindset that one is able to truly have faith in and understand the meaning of the Dharma.[11] Sincerity and faith are thus also importantly linked, especially with regard to her followers' approach to her teachings and the doctrinal reasons for their participation in Tzu Chi's missions. These inner practices are also at the heart of the admonishment against infidelity, meaning that these inner practices are also directed at the everyday conduct of Tzu Chi practitioners. Again, this highlights both the intermeshing nature of all of Cheng Yen's teachings, as well as the lack of differentiation between daily living and spiritual practice, reflected in the *dàochǎng* concept.

The fifth precept, which traditionally prohibits intoxication by alcohol, is supplemented by the sixth precept which prohibits drug use. In the description of these precepts on the

[10] One which spans many lifetimes.
[11] Cheng Yen, *Wondrous Lotus Sutra Episodes*, no. 1529.

foundation's website, it says that alcohol "impairs our judgment and may cause us to take actions that can harm ourselves and others," while drugs "harm our health and create addictions that disrupt our lives."[12] Both of these precepts are aimed at the avoidance of self-harm, while the description of the fifth precept specifically mentions that refraining from alcohol can help to create a safer society. The focus on the sixth precept appears to be avoiding the dangers of addictive substances like those it mentions, which obviously present an obstacle to the kinds of spiritual practices and charitable activities that Tzu Chi promotes. The prohibition on chewing betel nut is primarily directed at Tzu Chi practitioners throughout South East Asia, where this is a common practice, akin to the habit of chewing tobacco.

Precepts seven through ten represent Tzu Chi's adaptation of Buddhist practice to modern living. While the kind of drug addiction targeted by the sixth precept is not among the most common topics for Cheng Yen's Dharma-talks, gambling addiction is relatively more commonly addressed. In these instances, Cheng Yen relates stories that typically involve a male head of household who abandons his family duties to engage in gambling. Stories like these, as well as those addressing marital infidelity mentioned above, both typically end with the perpetrator discovering Tzu Chi's spiritual community and "changing their mindset" (*zhuǎnbiàn xīntài* 轉變心態). This sort of radical change in moral outlook is a common theme in Cheng Yen's Dharma-talks and represents the kind of ideal approach to life and spiritual practice that is often projected onto Tzu Chi's practitioners, as examined in the next chapter. Also addressed in Chapter III is the issue of filial piety, the focus of the eighth precept, which represents the fusion of the traditional Confucian notion of family with Tzu Chi's teachings.

[12] Tzu Chi Foundation, *Ten Precepts*, 2011.

In light of Tzu Chi's interest in creating a safer society, the ninth precept which encourages practitioners to drive mindfully and abide by all traffic laws makes sense. The tenth precept, however, which discourages Tzu Chi's followers from participating in political action, is relatively more nuanced. Cheng Yen has been clear about her intention to maintain Tzu Chi's political neutrality. Tzu Chi was founded in the midst of Taiwan's White Terror, during which tens of thousands of political dissidents were executed under the nearly 40-year period of martial law instituted by Chiang Kai-shek. Although martial law was lifted in 1987, Taiwan remains a politically sensitive place. The vibrant democracy of the island, as Richard Madsen describes it, flourishes despite Taiwan's disputed independence from China.[13] Along with a history of Taiwanese politicians, like former president Lee Teng-hui, seeking endorsement from Taiwan's major Buddhist organizations, these factors represent a complex political situation that Cheng Yen indicates is best avoided.

At the same time, Tzu Chi has also paired with the Taiwanese government on certain projects, or at least has benefited from government involvement. The land for Tzu Chi's first hospital, constructed in the city of Hualien, was donated by the government. The donation of public land was mutually beneficial in this case, enabling Tzu Chi to complete its objectives of providing medical care, while the government was able to cheaply ensure an increase in the standard of living for the remote eastern coast of the island.[14] Tzu Chi also regularly coordinates with the government on issues like localized disaster relief, for which the organization is always called upon to participate. This cooperation however does not entail any endorsement from Cheng Yen, nor, according to the tenth precept, from anyone else in the Tzu Chi Foundation.

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[13] Madsen, Richard, *Democracy's Dharma: Religious Renaissance and Political Development in Taiwan*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 5.
[14] Huang, Julia, *Charisma and Compassion, Cheng Yen and the Tzu Chi Foundation*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 189–90.

Cheng Yen continues to assert that the organization is better able to help people by remaining completely neutral, and while this has not entirely spared the organization from instances of public criticism, it officially maintains this neutral position under her leadership. While this distinction may appear false considering the ways that Tzu Chi has benefited from working with the government of Taiwan, Cheng Yen's claim of political neutrality stands in particularly sharp contrast with Foguang Shan's leader, Xing Yun, who regularly endorses political candidates and speaks out on political issues.[15]

Tzu Chi's Four Missions and Eight Dharma Footprints

While it is useful to understand these teachings in theory, it is also necessary to understand how they relate to practitioners and their identity. This is best exemplified through the work that Living Bodhisattva-practitioners undertake through the variety of initiatives that Tzu Chi offers. Tzu Chi's Four Missions are Charity, Medicine, Education and Humanistic Culture, and each one encompasses several initiatives in which many of its volunteers regularly participate. However, four of these initiatives in particular, one from each mission, have grown so rapidly in recent decades that they have been given their own organizational structure, setting them apart from the missions they belonged to. These initiatives are International Disaster Relief, Bone Marrow Donation, Community Volunteerism and Environmental Protection. Together with the Four Missions, they make Tzu Chi's Eight Dharma Footprints.[16]

Charity is the heart of the Tzu Chi Foundation. When Cheng Yen organized her students and disciples to begin a charity organization in 1966, she established a system for making case visits to the homes of disadvantaged people in and around her impoverished community of Hualien. This same system has been adapted and is still operative throughout Taiwan and around

[15] Pittman, *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism*, 275.
[16] Tzu Chi Foundation, "Tzu Chi Missions," (1 December, 2009).

the world today. Typical stories that Cheng Yen includes in her Dharma-talks involve an elderly or disabled person who is unable to care for themselves. In these stories, Tzu Chi volunteers make contact with these individuals and spend time creating a positive connection with them. After gaining the trust of the care recipient, volunteers work to clean their dwellings, provide them with furniture and clothing, and provide modest cash assistance when needed. In the original system, Tzu Chi Commissioners (*wěiyuán* 委員), or certified volunteers, were required to actively seek out new care recipients and to make monthly visits to everyone on their list.[17] Today, the system has become regionalized, and teams in a specific area make visits to those cases under their purview.

International Disaster Relief is an offshoot of the Charity mission. Since 1992, Tzu Chi has been conducting disaster relief abroad, and as of today, the organization has responded to crises in 85 countries. Tzu Chi's volunteers pay their own way to the disaster area, traveling efficiently in organized groups. Following Tzu Chi's strict guidelines for engaging in disaster relief, teams of volunteers often go in successive trips to assess the damage, formulate a plan, and carry out the short-term and long-term projects of distributing relief supplies and rebuilding the impacted community. Tzu Chi's teams of volunteers are known for planning beyond the short-range goals of distributing aid, and often long-term projects such as building schools and homes are undertaken for particularly devastated areas. In order to ensure the most efficient use of resources, volunteers identify the people and places with the greatest need. For example, following a major earthquake in Iran in December of 2003, Tzu Chi volunteers focused their efforts on the city of Bam.[18] Within 36 hours of the disaster, a team of volunteers including trained medical professionals was dispatched to provide immediate medical care to the survivors.

[17] Huang, *Charisma and Compassion*, 67–9.
[18] Cheng Yen, *The Path*, 220.

By the middle of March, funds were raised and supplies were gathered for a relief distribution that provided rice, blankets and clothing to people in the city. Meanwhile, volunteers established Project Hope, a long-range plan to rebuild schools for several communities throughout the city. This kind of quick mobilization and a graded approach to disaster relief is typical of Tzu Chi's relief missions, and its efforts have been recognized on the world stage.[19]

Tzu Chi's medical mission was the next to be established. Early in Cheng Yen's monastic career, several experiences among people in her community convinced her that a major cause of poverty with people's inability to afford their medical expenses. At that time, Hualien was largely disconnected from the western side of Taiwan, and hospitals with quality medical care were hours away from those who lived on the island's relatively poorer east side. Within just a few decades, as the organization began its rapid growth during Taiwan's economic boom of the 1980s, funds were gathered to break ground and the Tzu Chi Hualien General Hospital was inaugurated in August, 1986. Today, Tzu Chi has ten hospital locations across Taiwan, with the three primary facilities located in Hualien, Taichung and Taipei. To staff its hospitals, the organization has founded the Tzu Chi nursing school, and offers scholarships especially for Taiwanese aborigine students who typically come from impoverished communities. Additionally, the Tzu Chi International Medical Association, or TIMA, was also founded by the organization and is comprised of respected medical professionals who often volunteer in both localized medical outreach projects as well as the kind of international disaster relief missions described above.

[19] In addition to several international awards, the United Nations Social and Economic Counsel has granted the Tzu Chi Foundation special consultative status.

In 1992, after one of Cheng Yen's young followers was diagnosed with leukemia, the organization began a social campaign to start a bone marrow donation registry.[20] This initiative was met with resistance at the beginning, particularly due to cultural misconceptions and biases against organ donation. However, through a widespread campaign, the organization worked to change public opinion and opened its bone marrow registry in 1993. With a large influx of donors following this campaign, the organization became instrumental in helping to change organ donation laws in Taiwan in order to facilitate its efforts. By 2008, the program had successfully helped more than 1,500 people from over 25 countries, with more than 300,000 donors in its registry.[21] The Bone Marrow Donation initiative is a good example of the social and political clout Tzu Chi is able to wield due to its huge membership in Taiwan, and it gives an idea of the kind of following the organization hopes to build in other countries like the United States and mainland China.

Tzu Chi's Education Mission is also widely successful throughout Taiwan and around the world. In addition to its efforts to rebuild schools in the aftermath of disasters, Tzu Chi has established many "Tzu Chi Academy" after school programs for children in many countries. Aside from supplementing their regular education, Tzu Chi Academy is aimed at teaching students about Tzu Chi's humanistic culture. Teachers often use Cheng Yen's aphorisms, called *Jìng sī yǔ* 靜思語,[22] to impart the organization's values. Just as TIMA provides medical personnel to participate in Tzu Chi's Medical Mission, so the Tzu Chi Teacher's Association (TCTA) was established to provide teachers for its Education Mission. Similar to its international disaster relief efforts, the TCTA focuses its efforts on impoverished communities throughout

[20] Tzu Chi Foundation. "Bone Marrow Donation," (October 07, 2009).
[21] Ho, Gary, and Su-chiu Chiu, *Challenges: The Life & Teachings of Venerable Master Cheng Yen*, (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2009), 165.
[22] Referred to in English as "JingSi aphorisms," *jìng sī* meaning "still thoughts."

Taiwan. For example, Tzu Chi's teachers provide classes for aboriginal students in the Taiwan's central mountains. Taiwanese aborigines, who are primarily Christian or Catholic due to heavy missionizing by those groups in the first half of the 20th century, were initially very resistant to the presence of a Buddhist organization in their communities. Only by meeting with each family was the TCTA able to begin tutoring about one third of the families in its initial phase, and eventually the program's success enabled them to become an accepted presence in the community.[23]

Next is the Community Volunteerism initiative, the counterpart to the Education Mission, which bears a relatively ambiguous name. This initiative is essentially an effort to spread the same kind of humanistic education to other underserved groups outside of the classroom setting. A common manifestation of this initiative is prison outreach, which is also conducted by volunteers around the world. Like the Tzu Chi Academy classes, volunteers who conduct prison outreach also use JingSi aphorisms to discuss moral concepts with inmates. Occasionally Cheng Yen shares stories about particular inmates who were touched by the prison outreach program. Once they are released from prison, the people whose stories she shares often begin to volunteer with Tzu Chi and take part in its activities. While the success rates of these programs are not documented, they stand as an example of the level at which Tzu Chi's volunteers have been able to permeate all corners of Taiwanese society.

Tzu Chi's Humanistic Culture Mission encompasses a variety of initiatives aimed at imparting the organization's values to Taiwanese society (and the world) at large. The most impressive manifestation of this mission is Tzu Chi's DaAi TV station, a fully functioning television channel that broadcasts Tzu Chi related programming 24 hours a day. Programs

[23] Cheng Yen, *The Path*, 264.

includes Cheng Yen's Dharma-talks and soap-opera style "DaAi dramas" that depict the lives of people whose stories are cast to exemplify Tzu Chi's values. These dramas are similar in nature to the short biographical narratives that I examine in the next chapter in that they offer another mode of projecting an idealized identity onto the organization's practitioners. While their stories are certainly based on real-life events, they are also recast into productions which emphasize a series of values that are integral to the spirit of the organization and representative of the humanistic culture it works to spread.

Finally, Tzu Chi's Environmental Protection initiative is the last of the foundation's Eight Dharma Footprints. Aside from Cheng Yen's efforts to promote a vegetarian lifestyle and encourage her followers to be mindful of their impact on the environment at large, Tzu Chi's volunteers have also established a massive network of over 5,600 recycling stations throughout Taiwan. Gathering more than 2,000 tons of plastic bottles a year, the organization then transforms the recycled plastics into a host of disaster relief supplies, including blankets, clothing and foldable bedframes. Recyclables are also turned into retail items to be sold in Tzu Chi's JingSi bookstores, making the recycling program one of the organization's most profitable divisions.[24] A large part of the success of this program is due to the wide participation of elderly people in Tzu Chi's recycling stations. The stations serve as a gathering place for many elderly people who enjoy the sense of community and feel that their participation is giving a meaningful purpose to their lives.

Tzu Chi's volunteers are motivated by Cheng Yen's teachings, and they are encouraged to put them into practice through the various missions and initiatives described above in the latter half of this chapter. Selfless service, self-discipline, diligence, patience and concerted effort all

[24] Jennings, Ralph, "Taiwan Buddhists Transform Plastic Waste," Los Angeles Times, November 17, 2014.

characterize the identity of Tzu Chi's Living Bodhisattva-practitioners as they work in service of the organization's objectives. The accomplishments that the foundation's members and volunteers have been able to achieve on such a broad scale speak to the dedication of a large majority of its followers in Taiwan. While certain of these members may or may not identify with some or all of the teachings as outlined above, it is the larger spirit of the organization as a whole that drives the participation of individual volunteers to make its efforts a success, particularly in Taiwan. This spirit is enhanced with the specific values that Cheng Yen espouses in her teachings, paired with the organization's missions as the ideal outlet for their expression. In this way, the religious identity of Tzu Chi's practitioners is constructed in parallel with its missions, and their participation mirrors the conclusion of Greenfield and Marks in their study of religious social identity. Indeed, the size and scope of the organization as a whole speaks to the strength of their affiliation with the Living Bodhisattva identity. The next chapter examines how the creation and animation of this spirit depends in large part on the projection of a certain identity onto various individuals via short biographical narratives in one of its regular monthly publications.

Chapter 3
Projected Identity: Biographies of Living Bodhisattvas

Aside from the historical and exegetical dimensions of the Living Bodhisattva identity in Tzu Chi, there is a third dimension which serves primarily to reinforce it using real-life portrayals. This dimension is comprised primarily of short biographical narratives which are featured prominently in Tzu Chi's publications. Closely related to the exegetical dimension, these portrayals of the lives of real Tzu Chi practitioners represent an adaptation of Cheng Yen's teachings to the circumstances of their lives on the ground. This dimension is distinct from the exegetical dimension in that it rarely includes references to specific teachings like those examined in the previous chapter. Instead, these narratives serve to reify the notion of what it means to be a Living Bodhisattva by privileging certain moral qualities and behavioral practices. Through these portrayals, these qualities and practices are projected onto real practitioners, thus representing them as exemplary Tzu Chi practitioners. While it is beyond the scope of this analysis to determine the exact correlation between their real-life circumstances and the qualities and practices mapped onto them through this process, these textual representations of Living Bodhisattvas reinforce the spirit of the organization and help to further clarify the kind of religious identity that all of Tzu Chi's practitioners are encouraged to adopt.

Through the work that Tzu Chi's members and volunteers undertake, Tai Xu's and Yin Shun's ideas about the role of Buddhist practitioners in modern society have been largely brought to fruition. In Tzu Chi today, this role is given substance through the exegetical dimension of Cheng Yen's teachings. In accordance with Tzu Chi's brand of Humanistic Buddhism, Cheng Yen encourages her followers to cultivate inner purity through a life of charitable service and personal morality. Her interpretation of Buddhist Dharma is that it is an exhortation to regularly engage in a wide range of charitable activities, and the ideal embodiment

of her teachings to this end is the Living Bodhisattva identity.[1] This contextual lens is important for understanding how portrayals of Cheng Yen's followers in Tzu Chi's literature are construed. Practitioners are depicted as embodying the qualities and practices Cheng Yen teaches, and these representations project a kind of idealized identity onto the organization's real-life followers. These depictions of practitioners' lives are constrained to the framework of Cheng Yen's teachings, and their inclusion in Tzu Chi's promotional literature contributes to the spirit of the organization as a whole through the example they set. While it is useful to understand the Living Bodhisattva identity in terms of the history of Humanistic Buddhism and the specific values that Cheng Yen espouses, an examination of how this identity is projected onto Tzu Chi's practitioners provides an important third dimension of analysis.

Beyond Cheng Yen's doctrinal definition of what it means to be a bodhisattva, the Living Bodhisattva, as a category of identity, is most clearly portrayed through depictions of Tzu Chi's followers in the organization's many publications and productions. While the expectations for what it means to be a practitioner of Tzu Chi are often communicated through Cheng Yen's Dharma-talks, her teachings are almost always supplemented with specific examples of exceptional practitioners. In her Dharma-talks, Cheng Yen's tendency is to eschew strong doctrinal claims in favor of moving stories about real-life situations. Likewise, the Living Bodhisattva identity as a quintessential element of the Tzu Chi spirit is best understood through the idealized depictions of its practitioners. Thus, practitioner identity in Tzu Chi Buddhism under the label of Living Bodhisattva can be pieced together using the biographical accounts of both Master Cheng Yen and those practitioners who are depicted as exemplifying her values.

[1] Cheng Yen, *The Path*, 48–9.

In the style of other highly esteemed Chinese religious leaders, Cheng Yen's biographies depict her as having exceptional qualities, even from an early age.[2] Living in her monastic abode, she follows a strict schedule, refuses personal gifts, and lives by the Chan principle of "no work, no food to eat."[3] Among the biographical accounts of her life, a deep sense of faith in Buddhist teachings, a fervent aspiration to renounce the comforts of home, devoting her life entirely to the Bodhisattva-way, and making an offering of her body to the Dharma are but a few of the qualities attributed to Cheng Yen.[4] While on one hand, these depictions lend her credibility as a devout leader worthy of respect, they also provide a model of spiritual practice for her followers to emulate. The correlated attribution of these qualities to both Cheng Yen and her followers will serve as the primary focus of the analysis provided in the body of this chapter.

The model provided by the depiction of Cheng Yen's exceptional qualities is also reflected in short narratives about the lives of her followers found in Tzu Chi's periodical publications. In *Tzu Chi Monthly* (*Cíjì Yuèkàn* 慈濟月刊), a magazine detailing the foundation's work in Taiwan and abroad, individual followers are depicted as exemplifying the qualities emblematic of an ideal practitioner, just as the qualities portrayed in Cheng Yen's biographies portray her as an ideal leader. While the circumstances of their lives differ considerably, the practitioners featured in these narratives demonstrate some of these same qualities that are attributed to their leader in a variety of ways. When viewed side by side, the qualities demonstrated in each account can be woven together to form the Living Bodhisattva identity that reflects the objectives of spiritual practice that have been addressed so far. Thus, the diverse array of biographical narratives featured in this publication provide a series of real-life

[2] Ching, Yu-ing, *Master of Love and Mercy: Cheng Yen*, (Taiwan, Jing Si, 2005), 175–7.
[3] Fan, *Zhengyan*, 29–34.
[4] Ownby, David, Vincent Goossaert, and Chi Che, *Making Saints in Modern China*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2017), 1.

conditions within which the Living Bodhisattva identity is contextualized and reified as an achievable set of expectations for all Tzu Chi practitioners. This chapter provides a side by side comparison of key values using examples from the biographies of Cheng Yen and short narratives about the lives of her followers.

Filial Piety and Faith

Master Cheng Yen's biographies describe her early pursuits as fraught with many difficulties. After the death of her adopted father, Cheng Yen, then named Jinyun, followed the pattern of filial responsibility common to most women in her situation at that time by taking over financial responsibility for the household. Although she was apparently adept at the family business and did well in helping to provide for her adopted mother and younger siblings, the Buddhist faith she turned to for consolation pulled her strongly towards a monastic life. Under the mentorship of the abbess of a local temple, Master Xiu Dao, Jinyun learned both the requirements of the monastic lifestyle as well as Xiu Dao's critiques of the state of Buddhism in Taiwan at that time. Xiu Dao felt that Buddhism in Taiwan needed to break its dependence on the laity for funding and to participate more actively in charity work, ideas that were likely carried over from by reformist monks from Tai Xu's humanistic movement. Jinyun vowed to undertake these kinds of efforts when she became ordained.[5]

Jinyun's strong desire to seek a life beyond the customary familial role expected of her led her to run away from home several times. When she finally ran away with Xiu Dao to Taiwan's east side, far away from her childhood home, the two women lived an extremely sparse lifestyle. Living by the code of, "No work, no food to eat," the pair ate only what they could forage, while taking shelter in a dilapidated shrine without electricity or running water. During

[5] Madsen, *Democracy's Dharma,* 21.

this time of few resources and general scarcity, her biographies describe Jinyun's faith as being tested in ways she had not experienced while living with her family.[6] The reality of being a monastic and living by a strict code of discipline stood in stark contrast to the life she had enjoyed while operating her father's business and looking after her family.

Several years later, once Jinyun had become fully ordained and taken on the name Cheng Yen, she lived once more in relative scarcity. In a small wooden hut behind Hualien's Pu Ming Temple (*Pǔmíng sì* 普明寺) where she taught, Cheng Yen began to study Buddhist sutras and practice austerities, focusing primarily on the *Lotus Sutra* and devoting herself to its study.[7] According to her biographies, Cheng Yen's original reason for wanting to become a monastic practitioner was to provide for people beyond the bounds of her family. This made the *Lotus Sutra*'s bodhisattva ideal very appealing to her, and it would eventually become the foundational text of Tzu Chi. By orienting herself towards its key principles, she began to bring her vision of the Bodhisattva-path to fruition. Her small band of disciples began to raise money for charity projects, and soon, her small group experienced growth in both funding and membership.

Although a significant portion of her early years as a faithful Buddhist practitioner were lived without the comforts of home, family, or even sufficient food to eat, her faith in Buddhist teachings enabled her to advance towards her goal of establishing the Tzu Chi Foundation. Despite the harsh conditions she encountered during her time traveling with Master Xiu Dao and living in the small wooden hut, her biographies heavily emphasize the role of faith in her objectives and in the message of the *Lotus Sutra* throughout that time. She is portrayed as being intently focused on these values, and she attributes the growth of the Tzu Chi Merit Association, from a small group of 30 people into an international charitable foundation, to her faith and focus

[6] Ibid., 24.
[7] Fan, *Zhengyan*, 32.

on her mission. The faith displayed in these accounts is thus one of the most important qualities for Tzu Chi practitioners to emulate. Faith in Tzu Chi's missions and in Cheng Yen's interpretation of the Dharma are both regularly encouraged, as addressed in the previous chapter.

Faith also features strongly in narratives about Cheng Yen's followers. One such narrative from *Tzu Chi Monthly*, about a man named Weng Suoming, describes the role that faith played in his own story. According to the article, Weng is a Burmese emigrant who came to Taiwan seeking greater opportunities. Though his early life and new beginnings in Taiwan were fraught with difficulties, his faith in following the Buddha's way inspired him to make a better life for himself. According to the article,

> In order to save money to improve the lives of his family, the then 20-something-year-old chose to come by himself to Taiwan for work. Without a solid foundation in life and without knowing the language, he [certainly faced] many hardships. He sold things from a kiosk, drove a vegetable delivery truck, cleaned rotting shrimp from [transport] containers and carried cement for construction, among other things. Although this path was very difficult, the power of his faith accompanied him through hard times. Having made good connections through Tzu Chi, Brother [Suoming] wisely tells us, "We must first endure hardships to find the path of light. This path is called 'goodness,' and 'goodness' is the path the Buddha [followed]."
>
> 為了賺錢改善家中的生活，當年僅二十來歲的他選擇隻身來到臺灣工作，也因人生地不熟，語言不通，可說是吃盡苦頭。他曾擺過地攤，當送菜司機，清掃腐臭的釣蝦池，在建築工地扛水泥等。雖然一路走來很辛苦，但信仰的力量伴他度過難關，並與慈濟結上好緣，師兄很有智慧地說，「我們要忍苦才會找到明路，這個明路叫做『善』，　　而『善』就是佛陀的路。」[8]

Weng's story begins to mirror Cheng Yen's in several ways. Both of them leave home without having a clear idea of what lies ahead, and both are willing to endure the hardships required to achieve their objectives. In both cases, it is also the power of their faith that helps them to endure these hardships, and they are able to be patient and diligent even in the most unpleasant circumstances as a result.

[8] Huang Xiaozhe, "Bianchang qiongku de ziwei," (*Tzu Chi Monthly* No. 604, March 25, 2017), 59.

Additionally, both Weng and Cheng Yen are described as seeking a better life, not for themselves, but for the people most important to them. In Weng's case, his motivation is described as his family, while for Cheng Yen her motivation was to seek a better quality of life for society at large. Although Weng's initial motivation was to provide for his family, the kind of altruism depicted in Cheng Yen's story is also attributed to him later on as well.

> Because he was once poor, he [understands] even more clearly what it means to be a poor person. Out of a sense of filial piety, Brother Suoming worked hard to save money to help care for his parents. [Moreover], although he lives extremely frugally himself, when he sees anyone suffering from poverty, he gives with great generosity. Given the opportunity, he serves others to the best of his ability. As Brother [Suoming] shared with us, "For everyone in this [lifetime], money is only borrowed to us for temporary use. After we pass away, we cannot carry our wealth with us. In the time that we have, we must think about how others are [in need]. We must treat all sentient beings equally. To the best of our ability, we must share equally with others if we are to become perfectly complete, and we must be grateful for everything that we possess."
>
> 因為窮過，所以更清楚窮人的滋味。所明師兄出自孝心努力存錢奉養父母，自己卻過的十分節儉，但只要看到貧困窮苦的人，他都很捨得佈施，只要能力許可就會盡力付出，正如師兄分享的一段話，「人在世時，錢時借用的，往生後帶不走錢財。當我們有的時候，就要想到還有其他人沒有。對待眾生要平等，盡量不要單一享受有了平等才會完美，而且要感恩自己擁有的一切。」[9]

While Weng's initial focus was on providing for his family, after making contact with Tzu Chi, his focus is depicted as broadening to include all the impoverished people he encounters. Thus, the narrative covers both the sense of filial piety that motivated his move to Taiwan in the first place, as well as the sense of altruism that has shifted his focus to helping society at large. This portrayal also mirrors the blurred lines between familial responsibility and the responsibility to society that characterizes Cheng Yen's teachings to a large degree. In her own life fleeing home and her familial responsibilities is portrayed as a regrettable yet necessary step in Cheng Yen's biographies. Filial piety is strongly encouraged, as previously explained in the section about the Ten Precepts, which could be viewed as a way of making amends to her

[9] Huang, "Qiongku," *Tzu Chi Monthly* No. 604, 60.

own family. On the other hand, Cheng Yen also regularly encourages her followers to look beyond the bounds of their families and into society as a whole in order to practice the kind of large-scale altruism that Tzu Chi's missions encourage. As she explains in the first volume of *Chronological Studies,*

> Glory and wealth are like floating clouds. In this human realm of impermanence, why should we limit the range of our love to our family for the sake of temporary love and affection? Why should a housewife be content just buying food for her family? Why must she limit herself to such a small scope?[10]

This quote captures the mixed perspectives that characterize Cheng Yen's teachings about social altruism and familial responsibility. Here, two distinct philosophical threads are twisted together. The first is a sense of family responsibility that is distinctly Confucian, and which has had a deep impact on Chinese society for millennia. When it comes to ordering relationships in Chinese culture, both in mainland China and Taiwan, Confucianism has traditionally held a monopoly on determining the hierarchical structure. Confucius' concept of the Five Relations, ruler/subject, husband/wife, parent/child, elder/younger siblings, and friend/friend, were seen as a necessarily hierarchical framework for establishing and maintaining a harmonious society.[11] Throughout China's dynastic history, these five relationships provided structure to society in the form of social stratification. Although Confucian ideology was nearly annihilated during the first three decades of communist rule on the mainland, Confucianism remained very much alive as part of the authoritarian government of the Republic of China, after fleeing to Taiwan following their defeat the Chinese Civil War in 1949.[12] It is this strong cultural influence that might explain Cheng Yen's decision, as the oldest child, to take over her father's business and providing for her family.[13]

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[10] Fan, *Zhengyan*, 24.
[11] Madsen, *Democracy's Dharma*, 2.
[12] Ibid., 12.
[13] Ibid., 25.

On the other hand, Buddhism, even as a cross-cultural phenomenon, is typically conceptualized as encouraging its practitioners to detach from the bonds of family.[14] Part of the monastic lifestyle that Buddhism promotes has been classically depicted as requiring practitioners to leave behind many or sometimes all of the trappings of the lay-life in order to focus entirely on spiritual cultivation. While the reality is much more nuanced, and there are many accounts of monastics who retain their family ties in a multitude of ways, the monastic life usually always means leaving one's home to take up life in a monastery. For this reason, the Chinese word for becoming a monastic practitioner is "*chūjiā*" (出家, lit. "to leave the home/family"). It is a combination of these ideas that Cheng Yen expresses in the previous quotation. Tzu Chi by and large is a lay organization, and a common theme in Cheng Yen's sermons is the cultivation of "*dà'ai*" (大愛, lit. "Great Love") for all people in the world. In this way, her teachings follow the Confucian pattern of blurring the lines between the social and familial realms.[15] Tzu Chi practitioners are not expected to abandon their families to focus on others, but Cheng Yen's teachings do portray an extended definition of family, which encourages practitioners to expand the limited scope of their affections beyond their immediate relatives.

It is this extension of filial duty into a sense of great love for the world that is emphasized in both Master Cheng Yen's teachings and her biographies. From the portrayals of her relationship with her mother, it appears that the primary source of conflict early on was Jinyun's desire to become a monastic practitioner at the cost of leaving behind her family. Once Jinyun was tonsured and became Cheng Yen, establishing herself as the leader of a successful organization, these tensions were resolved. Until today, her mother has remained a strong

[14] Clarke, Shayne, *Family Matters in Indian Buddhist Monasticisms*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014), 2.
[15] Madsen, *Democracy's Dharma*, 47.

supporter of Tzu Chi's efforts.[16] She even purchased the original parcel of land where Cheng Yen built her Abode of Still Thoughts (*Jìngsī jīngshě* 靜思精舍). Cheng Yen also emphasizes the message of the "Sutra of Profound Gratitude to Parents" (*Fùmu ēn zhòng nánbaò jīng* 父母恩重難報經).[17] Her emphasis on repaying the grace of one's parents is perhaps an allusion to the gratitude she feels for her own mother's patience and endurance of her quest to become a Buddhist nun.[18]

This extension of love for one's family into a concern for the wellbeing of society is not so dramatized in Weng Suoming's story, but it is present there as well. Moreover, the motivating emotions underlying his care for his parents and his generosity towards those in need are depicted as being one and the same. It is the positive attributes of hard work and frugality, and not a sense of personal affection, that enable him to care for others according to the story. Likewise, his personal experience of enduring a life of poverty with his parents caused him to become generous towards other impoverished people, rather than to devote all of his resources to the "limited" care of his own family. Present in both Weng's and Cheng Yen's stories, these attributes represent a distinct elevation from limited affections to broader altruistic concerns. Both are bound by responsibility to their families, but the expression their care takes is not limited by this duty. As stated in Weng's story, they treat all people equally, showing no particular favor to their parents over others who are equally needy, yet caring well for them all the same.

[16] Ibid., 24.
[17] Cheng Yen, *Wondrous Lotus Sutra Episodes*, no. 859.
[18] Fan, *Zhengyan*, 28.

Total Devotion

Another very important attribute that appears in biographical accounts of both Cheng Yen and her followers is total devotion to one's spiritual cultivation. As mentioned above, renunciation of family ties is commonly depicted as a feature of monastic practice in the Buddhist traditions of many cultures throughout time. In Tzu Chi, this value is imparted to the laity through the encouragement of cultivating Great Love for all people, thus deemphasizing the role of "limited," or selfish affections. The bearing this teaching has on individual practitioners however, is that they are supposed to shift their focus away from worldly attachments and towards their spiritual cultivation through helping others.

This kind of single-minded focus on spiritual practice is most obviously portrayed in Master Cheng Yen's biographies in the context of her efforts to establish the Tzu Chi Foundation according to her own vows and principles. A variety of stories recount Cheng Yen's stubbornness and refusal to compromise her values in establishing the foundation. In particular, Tzu Chi's efforts to build a hospital in Hualien to serve Taiwan's east coast reflect Cheng Yen's devotion to her goal. Cheng Yen recounts that the primary obstacles for building the hospital were finding the land and acquiring the funding. Despite these obstacles, Cheng Yen believed the construction of a quality medical facility was crucial for raising the standard of living for Taiwan's east coast. Previously people in need of medical attention had to drive more than 200 miles around the southern end of the immense island to the city of Tainan, or more than 300 miles to Taichung. For this reason, Cheng Yen remained adamant. After finding an initial site to build the hospital, the organization still lacked the millions of dollars it would take to build the facility. One story tells how a Japanese businessman in 1981 offered the equivalent of nearly $200 million to build the hospital that Cheng Yen had envisioned. She refused him, however,

stating that she wanted the hospital to be funded through grassroots contributions from the people of Taiwan. With the Japanese occupation less than 100 years in the past, she felt that Taiwanese people would have difficulty gaining a sense of ownership and pride in this accomplishment if she had accepted his offer. Instead, the organization continued to rely on grassroots donations from Taiwan's burgeoning middle class, and by the second ground-breaking, on the government-donated land mentioned previously, donations from across the island enabled its completion following an increase in media attention when government officials visited the site.[19]

Total devotion to spiritual practice is thus expected of and projected onto Tzu Chi practitioners in a similar way, as Cheng Yen encourages them to prioritize their spiritual cultivation in all aspects of life. Given that spiritual practice in Tzu Chi Buddhism refers almost exclusively to volunteer work, this quality is most commonly projected onto Cheng Yen's followers as a devotion to volunteerism. A good example of this quality appears in the story of Huang Yuying. Several changes in her life are depicted as leading her gradually closer to her commitment to doing the work of Tzu Chi. Her story begins,

> After Huang Yuying graduated from [high] school, her parents divorced, and her older brother took her […] north to Taipei to attend college. She worked part-time while studying [for the entrance exam] to save up money for her college tuition. However, the year of her entrance examination, her father underwent surgery for a stomach ulcer, and Huang Yuying put aside advancing her education to move south and care for her father in Taizhong.
>
> 黃玉櫻小學畢業後，父母離異，哥哥帶著她[…]北上台北求學，半工半讀存下大學學費；但聯考那一年，父親因為胃潰瘍開刀，黃玉櫻於是放棄升學，南下台中照顧父親。[20]

[19] Huang, *Charisma and Compassion*, 189–92.
[20] Qiu Rulian, "Ganen youyuan-ren," (*Tzu Chi Monthly* No. 612, November 1, 2017), 53.

Huang's story begins with her abandoning her pursuit of higher education in order to care for her father. Again, the value of filial piety is invoked, and Huang's devotion to caring for her father foreshadows a broader devotion to spiritual practice as a higher order objective.

As Huang's story continues, her sense of devotion continues to develop in relation to shifting outside circumstances, just as it did in the case of her father's illness.

> In 1991, when Huang Yuying lost her father, her productivity took a hit, and she felt disillusioned towards life. A client introduced JingSi Aphorisms to her, and after reading them, she felt more in tune with her spirit. Beginning from that point, she wanted to learn more about what Tzu Chi does, and she sometimes went with her colleagues to participate in [volunteer] activities. "Following the Huadong flooding incident in mainland [China], I took to the streets with my colleagues to collect donations." Although many [Taiwanese] people at that time opposed "helping the mainland," she felt that this was a very meaningful undertaking. As Huang Yuying said, "My days seemed to become more and more meaningful, and I also felt very happy!"
>
> 一九九一年前後，黃玉櫻遭逢父親往生，自己流產等打擊，對人生有些失望。有客戶向她介紹靜思語，她讀了覺得很契合心靈，於是開始想了解慈濟在做什麼，有時也跟著同事一起參與活動。「大陸華東水災發生時，我跟著同事去街頭捧募款箱。」雖然有很多人反對「求大陸」，但她覺得這是件很有意義的事情。黃玉櫻說，「日子好像過得愈來愈有意義，我也覺得很快樂！」[21]

According to the story, after the death of her father, Huang found herself at a loss. Having put aside her personal goals in the interest of a higher cause, i.e. caring for her father, she became disillusioned when that cause was no longer present. Having become a housewife in the meantime, Huang's obligations were to her husband and mother-in-law, but household matters are not portrayed as holding the same kind of spiritual significance to her that caring for her father did. This too mirrors aspects of Cheng Yen's story, who, despite setbacks, continued to seek the spiritual objectives she set for herself.

Huang Yuying's search for meaning culminates in her encounter with Tzu Chi, and subsequent paragraphs describe her attempts to balance her Tzu Chi work with her career and household responsibilities. Indicating the meaning that Tzu Chi added to her life is the story of

[21] Qiu, "Ganen," *Tzu Chi Monthly* No. 612, 54.

working to collect donations for disaster survivors in mainland China. With constant political tensions between Taiwan and China, helping mainlanders was a highly controversial topic for many Taiwanese people. Living under a near-constant threat of military action for decades, fierce protests arose in response to Cheng Yen's announcement of her intentions to send a relief mission to help flood survivors in Huadong.[22] From Huang's perspective, however, making an effort to help these people was extremely meaningful, suggesting that devotion to Tzu Chi's cause should transcend even strongly held national commitments.

As the portrayal of Huang's involvement with Tzu Chi continues over the course of this narrative, her devotion to spiritual practice transcends yet another of her worldly attachment's.

> Every time she went on a [volunteer] case visit, Huang Yuying requested time off from her company. […] When her company outsourced production to the mainland, her boss wanted her to stay on and help with the business. However, her mind was no longer set on working to earn more money, so she firmly resigned her [position at] work. Every day [since then], her life has been spent almost entirely doing Tzu Chi work, but Huang Yuying never feels tired. She says, "As I do volunteer work, all around me I hear only positive things, and [everyone] I encounter is kind and full of love. That energy is like a fully-charged battery, an unending source of power."
>
> 每當出門訪視，黃玉櫻就向公司請假。[…]公司產業外移大陸，老闆希望黃玉櫻留下來協助公司，但她的心已經不在工作賺錢上了，毅然決然辭去工作。每天的生活幾乎都在做慈濟事，但黃玉櫻從來不覺得累，她說，「做志工，身邊聽到的都是正向的，遇到的都是善的，充滿愛的，那能量就像一顆充滿電的電池，源源不絕。」[23]

Here, Huang abandoned her final independent pursuit in favor of volunteering with Tzu Chi. Having first abandoned her academic pursuits to help her father, she then abandoned her career pursuits in order to help others through her volunteer work with Tzu Chi. This sense of devotion that transcends the pull of material wealth is common to both Huang's and Cheng Yen's stories. For Cheng Yen, rejecting the businessman's offer of help in a time when the fund for the hospital was greatly lacking required a serious detachment from such a large and immediate source that

[22] Huang, *Charisma and Compassion*, 198–9.
[23] Qiu, "Ganen," *Tzu Chi Monthly* No. 612, 55.

could have easily solved her problem. For Huang, seeking a meaningful life through devotion to Tzu Chi became the focus of her life. The narrative does not indicate whether Huang has another source of income, but an image depicting her and her husband with their grandchildren, along with her age,[24] suggests that she may have been ready for retirement soon anyway. Aside from lay-women, who out-number men by about two to one, older people and retirees make up another significant percentage of Tzu Chi's demographic.[25] Many retirees, in particular, work in Tzu Chi's recycling centers around the island, many of whom claim that their participation gives a sense of purpose and community to their lives beyond the working world. In this way, their spiritual devotion, like that of Huang's, shows a willingness to engage in this kind of spiritual practice in lieu of embracing the material comforts that many people associate with retirement in Western societies.

Moreover, Huang's efforts in doing Tzu Chi work are described several times as tireless. This is another quality attributed to Cheng Yen, whose strict schedule and constant work are well known throughout the organization. Even when she is ill, Cheng Yen insists on doing as much work as she is able so that no time is wasted.[26] Thus, for Tzu Chi practitioners, total devotion to spiritual cultivation means tireless work done joyfully in the service of others. Along with a corresponding measure of personal sacrifice, devotion to Tzu Chi, as a component of practitioner identity, requires constant effort and engagement of both body and mind in order to accomplish its objectives. In the next section, it will become clear how this devotion of body and mind even transcends the Tzu Chi practitioners' present lifetimes and extends beyond their death.

[24] According to the article, Huang was born in 1961, making her 56 years old at the time this issue was printed.
[25] Huang, *Charisma and Compassion*, 169. Of a sample group of Tzu Chi members, all but one were over 40 and one third were over 50.
[26] Fan, *Zhengyan*, 97.

Making an Offering of One's Body

The total devotion of one's mind and body discussed in the previous section also carries several implications for the lives of both Master Cheng Yen and her followers. For Cheng Yen, this devotion has at times entailed the use of her own body as an offering to the Buddha's Dharma, whether metaphorically or literally. Metaphorically, Cheng Yen's refusal to rest much while sick and her perseverance through periods of non-ideal circumstances represent one measure of her devotion. Literally, however, it is well recorded that, during her time in the wooden hut, she regularly made a sacrifice of her own body when she lacked the resources to make any other kind of offering. According to her biographies, as she finished her recitations and prostrations to the *Lotus Sutra* on the 24th day of each lunar month, she would burn incense on her arms as a form of sincere offering. She burned at least 12 of these scabs into her arms, and through this practice of observing the pain, she came to have several insights into the nature of suffering and impermanence.[27]

While this toleration and observance of pain may seem out of place in a tradition that emphasizes pragmatic charitable works as the most effective means of spiritual cultivation, it is also representative of her faithful devotion. The burning of incense scars was not an uncommon practice in Chinese Buddhism, particularly as a rite of intiation during Tai Xu's time.[28] However, to do so regularly as a measure of devotion to the *Lotus Sutra* appears to be relatively more uncommon. As Cheng Yen states in *Chronological Studies*, burning the incense on her arms was the only option available to her for making offerings at that time. This act that some might call self-mutilation is therefore not depicted as such in her biographical accounts. Instead, it is portrayed as a willingness to endure physical pain and exhaustion for a higher cause, an attribute

[27] Ibid., 28–9.
[28] Pittman, *Towards a Modern Chinese Buddhism*, 54.

which translates into the practice of her followers as well.[29] Simply being willing to travel very long distances, to work arduously for long hours, and to endure tough labor in unfavorable conditions is a primary manifestation of this quality. By setting aside personal comfort, Tzu Chi's volunteers sacrifice their physical wellbeing in favor of serving others, an attribute that figures heavily in stories of Tzu Chi's disaster relief missions.

This attribute is also commonly emphasized in the context of Tzu Chi's Medical Mission. As in most medical schools, part of the training that future nurses and doctors in Tzu Chi's medical school undergo requires them to work with cadavers to build their knowledge of anatomy and pathology. In order to supply the school with cadavers, Tzu Chi has worked to push beyond the cultural taboos surrounding death by encouraging its followers to donate their bodies to science upon their passing.[30] Cheng Yen's appeals to begin this practice reasoned that the best way to make use of the body after death is to donate it to Tzu Chi's Silent Mentor (*Wúyǔ liáng shī* 無語良師) program. By donating one's body, she says, medical students are able to use the knowledge they acquire to save lives and relieve the suffering of others. Thus, the Silent Mentor program represents an extension of practitioners' total devotion of their bodies and minds to Tzu Chi's missions.

A memorial to one such donor, named Tang Shaofan, is recorded in *Tzu Chi Monthly*. Tang, who came into Tzu Chi later in life, aspired to become a Silent Mentor after receiving a terminal diagnosis. In this narrative about his life and his work with Tzu Chi, he is portrayed as working very earnestly with the media production team and mentoring other newly certified members. The following account portrays the attitude Tang held with regard to his relatively late entrance into the organization and his aspiration to do the work of Tzu Chi.

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[29] Ibid., 97.
[30] Madsen, *Democracy's Dharma*, 40.

> "Master, I am already 75 years old, and I have only just been certified. I am too late." In 2003, after Tang Shaofan became a certified Faith Corps[31] member, this is what he shared with Master Cheng Yen on stage at a morning volunteer meeting. "No! You're not too late! You can keep going for another 20 years." Master kindly wished him this blessing. Tang Shaofan encouraged himself, saying, "I must take good care of my body and earnestly do Tzu Chi work, so that I can hopefully keep working [at this] until I am 95."
>
> 「上人，我已經七十五歲了，現在才受證，我太遲了。」二ＯＯ三年湯少藩受證慈誠隊員後，在一次志工早會上臺分享時，向證嚴上人說。「不遲！不遲！還可以再做二十年。」上人慈藹的祝福他。湯少藩自勉：「一定要好好照顧身體，好好做慈濟，希望能做到九十五歲。」[32]

This attitude of regret and earnest devotion is present throughout the entirety of Tang's narrative. It is unclear whether he was a practitioner of Buddhism prior to joining Tzu Chi, however his desire to do Tzu Chi work as long as possible is heavily emphasized. As his story continues, these threads of sincere devotion and regret are woven together to explain the decision he makes regarding his terminal condition. While such a decision may be difficult for anyone who is not suffering from an untreatable illness to imagine, the aspect of religious identity that it reinforces is the devotion and willingness to make an offering of one's body for a higher cause.

> Having volunteered for more than 10 years with the media production team, Tang Shaofan's [normally] healthy visage began to show some irregularity. In April 2016, doctors diagnosed him with stomach cancer that had already spread to his liver and kidneys. In the last several months of his life, he was only willing to take his hemostatic medication, while still regularly attending volunteer activities. He said, "I will not undergo surgery or chemotherapy. I must face what's coming sooner or later, and as a Tzu Chi volunteer, [I wish to] leave my body complete and donate it [for medical research]."
>
> 投入真善美志工十餘年，湯少藩健朗的身影卻出現異狀。二Ｏ一六年四月，醫師確診罹患胃癌並已轉移肝，腎。生命最後的幾個月，他只肯吃止血藥，照常參加志工活動。他說：「我不開刀，也不化療。遲早要來的就面對，我是慈濟人，保留完整身體去捐大體。」[33]

Having been diagnosed with terminal cancer, Tang made the decision to forgo the surgery and chemotherapy that could potentially have extended his life. Instead, as a measure of

[31] The all-male division of Tzu Chi's volunteer force, originally established as a security team (*Cíchèng duì* 慈誠隊, lit. "Compassion Sincerity Team").
[32] Chen Meiyi, "Tangba de yuanwang," (*Tzu Chi Monthly* No. 604, March 25, 2017), 81.
[33] Chen, "Tangba," *Tzu Chi Monthly* No. 604, 84.

his devotion, he felt that it would be more valuable to donate his body, unaltered, to Tzu Chi's medical college. While the specific reason for refusing to undergo such a treatment is not given, Tang's diagnosis suggests that the pain entailed in chemotherapy and radiation would have diminished his quality of life in his remaining months. In the paragraphs that follow, Tang is described as attending volunteer functions as regularly as possible and taking little or no personal time to rest, despite his terminal diagnosis. Rather than the fear or anger one might expect from someone in his position, Tang's story describes that his primary emotional reaction was regret. In a letter to Cheng Yen, Tang asks her forgiveness for failing to take better care of himself. He explains how he was previously diagnosed with stomach ulcers, yet he continued to "eat greedily" and "failed to curb his greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance and doubt."

This self-effacing attitude appears to be common in these biographical narratives about the lives of Tzu Chi's practitioners, and Tang's case is no exception. This memorial to his life provides an example of the offering that Tzu Chi's practitioners are willing to make of their bodies, whether metaphorically through their ardent volunteer efforts, or literally as one of Tzu Chi's Silent Mentors. In a final event celebrating his life, Cheng Yen comforts him.

> The Master said to him, "Don't be nervous! You have been learning Buddhism and following me for so long now, you should be able to relax and feel at ease. Do not be afflicted; you must guard well your aspiration [to follow the Bodhisattva-way]."
>
> 上人跟他說，「不要緊！你學佛這麼久了，也跟師父這麼久了，應該都很輕安，很自在，不要有煩惱，要顧好你這一念心。」[34]

This short quotation from Cheng Yen represents an extension of the devotion that characterizes the identity of Tzu Chi practitioners. In addition to the sacrifice expected of practitioners while living, as volunteers, and in death, as silent mentors, their mission to advance on the bodhisattva-path persists beyond their present lifetime. Cheng Yen's admonition to "guard his aspiration" is a

[34] Ibid. 85.

common feature in her Dharma-talks. While this expectation is most pertinent to this lifetime, it is also intended to apply to future lifetimes as well. As discussed in Chapter I of this thesis, the bodhisattva-path of revealing one's intrinsic nature of True Suchness entails that practitioners are reborn based on the good karmic seeds, or *bīja*, they plant by doing good deeds. As opposed to other traditions which seek to eliminate karmic seeds altogether, the goal for Tzu Chi practitioners is to accumulate as many good seeds as possible.[35] This is supposed to enable them to gain a sense of mastery over the cyclic existence of samsara by fostering a willingness to serve others over successive lifetimes. Thus, Cheng Yen's words to Tang in the quotation above are intended to discourage the kind of afflictive emotions he expressed to her, while encouraging him to hold tightly to his wish to continue doing good deeds in the next lifetime. In this way, Tang's sacrifice of what might have been his final months represents a kind of devotion similar to that which Cheng Yen showed by burning her arms with incense. By refusing treatment, Tang demonstrated his devotion to the cause of educating others to relieve suffering.

These three short narratives have been selected to convey some of the strongest qualities which comprise the ideal Tzu Chi practitioner's religious identity. A knowledge of Master Cheng Yen's own history examined alongside these accounts of her followers reveals the qualities held in common between their stories, which are thus reinforced through these narratives. Notably, these accounts make little mention of what might be thought of as traditional Buddhist doctrine. On the whole, there is little, if any, mention of specific sutra passages or even references to stories about the Buddha's life. By avoiding specific doctrinal claims, stories like these primarily serve to provide some on-the-ground context to the qualities Cheng Yen and the Tzu Chi Foundation highlight as essential to the religious identity of Living Bodhisattva-practitioners.

[35] Cheng Yen, *Wondrous Lotus Sutra Episodes,* No. 1186.

Conclusion
The Profile of a Living Bodhisattva

In the Tzu Chi school of Buddhism, Dharma Master Cheng Yen encourages her followers to engage in helping others as the most effective means of self-purification. By going among people and doing good deeds, Tzu Chi practitioners gain wisdom experientially, which helps to purify their karmic afflictions. Through this process, they cultivate Samadhi by focusing on their ability to serve others without being affected by the negative karmic influences which pervade the environments in which they work. In keeping with this idea, Tzu Chi's volunteer missions are best categorized as a form of *dāna*, or the practice of charitable giving. *Dāna* is also the first of the Six Pāramitās, six practices among several that are central to the practice of the bodhisattva-path that Cheng Yen promotes. Tzu Chi's adherents are encouraged to practice giving in many forms, and a variety of other qualities and practices that Cheng Yen emphasizes all contribute to the formation of the Living Bodhisattva-identity that she encourages her followers to embody. According to Cheng Yen's teachings, Tzu Chi's Living Bodhisattva-practitioners are supposed to eliminate afflictions and ignorance in themselves and others by engaging with people, understanding their condition, and relieving their suffering through giving. This is Tzu Chi's definition of the bodhisattva path.[1]

As they engage in this process, Cheng Yen's goal for her followers is relatively simple: to go among people and do good deeds in a meaningful way. Moreover, she encourages her devotees to embrace worldly life by using the wisdom of the Buddha's teachings to engage in their mission of helping others. She describes this ideal using the analogy of a lotus flower that flourishes in the mud from which it rises.[2] Taking in the mud that covers its roots, the flower blooms above the

[1] Cheng Yen, *The Path,* 80.
[2] Cheng Yen, *Wondrous Lotus Sutra Episodes*, no. 1397.

darkened waters. This imagery is pervasive in Tzu Chi, representing the centrality of Cheng Yen's exhortation to directly engage with "ordinary people" (*fánfū* 凡夫, *viz.* the unawakened) and help them transform their afflictions into *bodhicitta.* Specifically in the context of Tzu Chi Buddhism, this process refers to the simultaneous self-purification and awakening of compassion for others, which should result in a desire to take direct action, as envisioned by Tai Xu.

This is the way that Tzu Chi's missions are framed in Cheng Yen's Dharma-talks. Intermeshed with some of the most common Buddhist teachings about the law of karma and the path to liberation from cyclic existence is a strong and often repeated message about the Bodhisattva-path. The good deeds of those who follow Tzu Chi's school of Buddhism are not simply guaranteeing blessings in their future lifetimes. According to Cheng Yen, engaging in these good deeds makes Tzu Chi practitioners into "Living Bodhisattvas," who remain dedicated to helping others wherever they are needed, lifetime after lifetime. This is the intersection at which Tzu Chi's Humanistic Buddhist doctrine meets the issue of practitioner identity. For Tzu Chi practitioners, to be a Living Bodhisattva is the primary expression of religious identity, and it represents a multi-dimensional embodiment of the spirit of Humanistic Buddhism. This religious identity is rooted in historical sources, primarily the works of Tai Xu and Yin Shun, who helped to define the role that the ideal Humanistic Buddhist practitioner should adopt. Cheng Yen's exegesis of Buddhist texts also reinforces this identity by making use of ubiquitous teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism to explain how Tzu Chi's doctrine of serving others is to be embodied by its Living Bodhisattva-practitioners. This standard of expectations that she creates is in turn projected onto real life practitioners in a way that, by mirroring certain characteristics from her own life, ties them to Cheng Yen while reinforcing an institutionalized set of normative qualities and practices which define what it means to be a Living Bodhisattva.

In the world of Tzu Chi, as Cheng Yen often refers to it, these Bodhisattva-practitioners form a network of volunteers, some of whom don their blue and white uniforms daily to participate in one or another of Tzu Chi's missions. In her lectures, as she describes the work of these Living Bodhisattvas, Master Cheng Yen consistently praises them for their diligence, from their work in local charity functions and Tzu Chi's recycling centers to their quick response to the scene of natural and manmade disasters. Going hand-in-hand with this praise are practices and attributes traditionally attributed to bodhisattvas in texts like the *Lotus Sutra*, which Cheng Yen adapts to this modern context, of which the Six Pāramitās are a primary example. It is this fusion of traditional values and modern ethics that gives rise to Cheng Yen's particular brand of Buddhism, out of which this Living Bodhisattva identity is born.

With regard to practitioners' interactions with Tzu Chi, whether they are listening to Cheng Yen's Dharma-talks, participating in its volunteer activities, or interacting with others according to its values, Social Identity Theory provides a useful framework for analysis. Turner posits that there is a strong interface between individuals and the groups with which they identify due to the fact that social groups can be better conceptualized as an adaptive social psychological process.[3] While a group exists physically only as a collection of its members, on the other hand, the function a group plays in the lives of its individual members, or perhaps its "spirit" to use less technical language, is composed of informational influence which is validated only to the degree that it is reflective of ingroup consensus.[4] It is this consensus about the validity of informational influence, in this case the teachings of Cheng Yen, that directly contributes to a sense of group cohesion and social identity, which is particularly strong in Tzu Chi. Thus, for example, Tzu Chi members' consensus on the correctness of Cheng Yen's teachings in terms of their correspondence with

[3] Turner et al., Rediscovering the social group, 40.
[4] Ibid., 76.

reality could, in one sense, be said to make Tzu Chi what it is as a collection of people, while also reinforcing a certain social category with which its practitioners identify.

Correspondingly, the paper on religious social identity by Greenfield and Marks also suggests that more frequent religious participation is a reliable predictor of a stronger sense of religious identity.[5] On the whole, Cheng Yen's teachings focus on certain behaviors and practices which are normalized through group consensus, as established by Turner. For the purposes of this thesis, this collection of qualities and practices is equivalent to the Living Bodhisattva as an expression of religious identity. This collection of qualities and practices that constitutes this religious social identity are directly adapted to their application in Tzu Chi's missions through Cheng Yen's teachings, creating a direct link between practitioner identity and religious participation. This corresponds with Greenfield and Marks' findings which explain how the overall volume of religious participation in Tzu Chi's functions can be directly correlated with the strength of its followers' sense of religious social identity. Thus, the Living Bodhisattva as an expression of this kind of religious identity is evident in the scope and success of the organization's missions, particularly in Taiwan.

Indeed, the sheer size and efficacy of the group as a whole indicates the extent to which the Living Bodhisattva-identity serves as a salient social category with which Tzu Chi's members identify in a meaningful way. Particularly in Taiwan, where Tzu Chi's presence is most visible, its hospitals, schools and recycling centers present different outlets for the kind of strong religious participation that Greenfield and Marks' paper examines. For Tzu Chi practitioners, what truly forges this link between Tzu Chi as a religious group and the Living Bodhisattva as an expression of religious social identity are the teachings of Cheng Yen. Out of all the various aspects of what

[5] Greenfield, *Religious Social Identity*, 252.

it means to be a Tzu Chi practitioner, several of which I have not directly addressed here, listening to and studying Cheng Yen's teachings are the most common element shared among all who participate in Tzu Chi, even in places as diverse as Mozambique, Turkey and the United States. In particular, for those of its members in Taiwan, the religious component of Tzu Chi is extremely important for reinforcing their social identity as Living Bodhisattvas.

From this perspective, I would argue that the self-identification of individual members as "Tzu Chi people" is less important for understanding the Living Bodhisattva identity than the doctrinal component examined above, at least for understanding its institutional definition. This is because, as the identity is defined from the position of Cheng Yen's teachings, her followers are often depicted as existing in alignment with or deviation from it, a theme she often references in her Dharma-talks. One common saying that appears frequently in her talks is, "*Chà zhī háolí shī zhī qiānlǐ* 差之毫釐失之千里" – "The slightest deviation leads us far off course." The message is often that, as long as one is practicing the Six Pāramitās, Four Infinite Minds, and all those other teachings both present in and absent from my analysis here, then one is naturally engaging in the bodhisattva-practice, i.e. in the work of Tzu Chi. Those who do not are merely "ordinary people," while those who do are awakened sentient beings (*jué yǒuqíng* 覺有情). Thus, participating in Tzu Chi's missions means accepting and adopting a preformulated identity that perfectly aligns Tzu Chi's Buddhist doctrine with a program of volunteer-based religious activities.

Of course, it is unrealistic that all Tzu Chi practitioners, even those who strongly identify with the organization and its missions, should embody the Living Bodhisattva-identity at all times or to its fullest extent. However, the standard of expectations it represents and the strong emotional ties that Cheng Yen's charisma fosters between herself and her followers demonstrates that this category of identity is highly salient for those practitioners who regularly engage in Tzu Chi's

missions and initiatives.[6] Indeed, accounts in many scholarly works attest to the emotional affect Cheng Yen's followers demonstrate, both in response to personal encounters with "the Master" (*shàngrén* 上人) as well as to their encounters with "those who suffer" (*kǔnàn rén* 苦難人) in the course of their volunteer work. This affect is directly tied to their participation in Tzu Chi and reflects a strong social identity that is rooted in the history of Humanistic Buddhism, reinforced through Cheng Yen's teachings, and projected into the social sphere through Tzu Chi's publications.

[6] Huang, *Gendered Charisma*, 30.

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